

The POLL Database: Roper Center's Online Source for Public Opinion Research

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the Roper Center and POLL

Established in 1946, the Roper Center contains the largest archives of public opinion research data in the world. This collection includes the basic data from over 10,000 public opinion surveys conducted since 1936, which have been gathered from over 40 major United States suppliers, and over 70 foreign countries. The Roper Center classifies approximately 65% of its materials as public affairs studies, 20% as market and consumer surveys, with the remaining studies focusing primarily on

communications and mass media research. Not only an archival facility, the Roper Center provides its clients with services such as data analysis and interpretation, and searches of the archive. The thousands of scholars who have made use of the Center's data archives and services have tapped a rich source of machine-readable data, which is stored on magnetic tape.

In 1980, the Roper Center began planning a new service, an online retrieval system that would allow researchers, with the use of a computer and modem, to tap directly a database that would contain survey questions and responses. In 1983 this system, POLL, was constructed and is now available by subscription to researchers across the U.S. and internationally. The content of POLL differs from machine-readable data files in that the POLL database contains no raw data. Rather, POLL approximates a bibliographic database, with each record giving all the information necessary to form a complete citation. Searchers retrieve, upon entering a topic, three basic kinds of information: the texts of poll questions related to that topic, the responses to each question, and "study level" information: the dates the poll was conducted, by whom, the type of sample, and so on. The following is an example of a record, which illustrates the various fields of information available:

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Question:

R12 The Reagan Administration has proposed giving \$100 million in military, medical and economic aid to the rebels fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

Responses:

Favor 33%

Oppose 54%
 Not sure 13%
 Survey Organization: NBC/Wall Street Journal
 Population: National adult
 Population size: 1599
 Interview method Telephone
 Beginning date: APR 28, 1986 Ending date:
 APR 29, 1986
 Source Document: NBC News/Wall Street
 Journal
 Date of Source Document: MAY 12, 1986
 Subject: LATIN
 DIPLOMACY
 PRESIDENCY

FULL QUESTION ID: USNBCWSJ.051286.R12

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The need for an online system like POLL that would provide accurate and inexpensive data to their clientele was very apparent to the Roper staff who conducted manual searches of the archives for clients. Prior to the start of the online service, the staff created manual subject indexes of the reports, or used indexes that were sometimes supplied by the contributing survey organizations. To conduct a search for a client on a particular topic, in a specific time frame, was very labor intensive: many times this included having to sit down and read the entire report. Data were then compiled for patrons through a great deal of cutting, pasting, and photocopying. It was not uncommon for the Roper staff to have to pull the same study ten times within a year and document the same things ten times. Obviously, this degree of labor intensiveness made jobs very costly for the paying patron. For many people, including academics, with limited financial resources, the cost was out of reach. In the online system, the data are simply input once, in a standard format, and are readily available. Through POLL, Roper is meeting its goal to provide easy access to data which are timely and accurate, while holding down costs, both internally and to the clients it serves.

Scope of the POLL Database

Researchers using POLL should have a good understanding of the types of questions contained in the database. POLL incorporates all surveys with national samples that come into the archives, from most of the major polling organizations, such as Gallup, Roper, Yankelovich, Harris, and major media like ABC, CBS, NBC, Los Angeles Times, and many more. POLL includes only national surveys. Although the Roper Center does archive data files from international surveys, such as the U.S. International Agency Surveys, and state-level studies such as the Minnesota Poll, these are not added to POLL. Roper Center has, however, begun planning to create a separate database of state-level surveys, though initiation of this database is still several years down the road.

There are two types of study which are undertaken by the polling organizations and entered into POLL. Most organizations which store their survey results at the Roper Center conduct omnibus surveys—ongoing surveys which measure changes in attitudes over a period of time. In addition, omnibus surveys cover many different types of political data or policy issues in one study. The second type of study is the special, one-time study. Typically, these studies focus on a specific, major topic: "As a result of the weapons deal (with Iran and the Contras in Nicaragua) that is now coming to light, do you think the U.S. Congress should cut back on American military aid to Israel, or do you think Congress shouldn't do that?" A single search in POLL will find both types of study.

Who Uses POLL?

The main users of POLL are from academia, the media, business, and even polling organizations, who may use POLL to design a study, or to compare their results to those of other organizations. Academic institutions may also be members of ISLA (International Survey Library Organization), the cooperative, educational arm of the Roper Center. ISLA members enjoy reduced rates for many of the Roper Center's services, including the use of POLL. Annual subscription rates for POLL vary according to member/non-member status and whether the institution receives the reduced ISLA rate.

The Roper Center is trying to alert users, especially those in academia, of the value of making POLL available to students for classroom use, particularly in disciplines such as sociology, political science, journalism, and any of the increasing number of academic departments that utilize public opinion research as part of student coursework. The Center is encouraging institutions to take out a POLL account, and give students direct access to the database. At present, Roper Center is in the process of negotiating a subscription to one institution for the purpose of direct access for its students. To open such a subscription requires a great deal of planning on the part of both Roper and the institution, mainly because of the internal bookkeeping required by allowing general access.

The Plan for Building the POLL Database

The staff at the Roper Center have set entering the most current data as their highest priority, with omnibus surveys taking precedence over special, one-time studies. Typically, when an omnibus study comes in, unless it is extraordinarily large, it is entered into the database within two weeks, so that the information is very current. Special studies are entered as quickly as possible, though these surveys are more time-consuming to enter than the omnibus studies. At present, the entry of omnibus studies is almost complete for all studies conducted from 1974 to the present.

At the same time that current data are being loaded, Roper Center is retrospectively entering data from older surveys. Ultimately, the database will include information going back to 1937. An average of 500 questions a week are entered into the system: over 79,000 questions have been entered thus far. No specific target date for the completion of the retrospective entry project has been set. Predicting how long it will take to enter all national surveys is difficult, as the number of collections available in the earlier years decreases. Still, it will be several years before the retrospective entry of national poll data is completed.

How Can POLL Aid Research?

A researcher may need to use POLL only to satisfy a public opinion research question. For example, a researcher interested in the question of whether people think children should be taught sex education courses might find this kind of information through a POLL search:

Question:

Q14G Do you think that public elementary schools in this community should or should not teach sex education in grades 4 through 8? (If favor sex education in grade 4 through 8, ask:) Should this program include discussions about AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), or not?

Responses:

Favor sex education/Include discussions of AIDS 67%

Favor sex education/Don't include discussions of AIDS 4%

Oppose sex education 21%

No opinion 8%

Survey Organization: Gallup Organization

Population: National adult

Population Size: 503

Interview method: Telephone

Beginning date: FEB 9, 1987 Ending date: FEB 25, 1987

Source Document: Gallup Poll

Date of Source Document: MAR 22, 1987

Subject: SEX

EDUCATION

HEALTH

FULL QUESTION ID: USGALLUP.032287.R1

However, if a more detailed analysis than this is needed, e.g. a breakdown of responses by age, race, men vs. women, etc., the machine-readable data files must be tapped. The researcher, having isolated the correct studies through a POLL search, must contact the Roper Center to establish whether the Center has the corresponding data sets. These data sets contain the raw data of individual responses to survey questions, and are stored on magnetic tape. POLL, in this example, has served as a reference tool, leading the researcher to the data sets which are rich in information on the his topic.

Roper generally does have the data sets referred to in POLL, (though there are some exceptions, e.g. the Harris Poll, which is archived at the University of North Carolina.) The Center receives the data directly from the contributing survey organizations, though the lag time for receipt of the sets varies greatly from one organization to another. Some organizations send out six months worth of data sets at a time, while others send their data each time a study is conducted. In addition, academic researchers whose institutions are members of the ISLA, may find that their institution has purchased the tapes from Roper, and that they may access the files on their own campuses.

How is POLL Searched?

Anyone familiar with library card catalogs or printed periodical indexes understands that they may hunt for books or articles using set "fields" of information—author, title, or subject. Researchers who have made the transition from print catalogs and indexes to online searching—whether searching a library's online catalog or the databases of a commercial information vendor, such as Lockheed Information Systems' DIALOG, System Development Corporation's ORBIT, or the Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS)—find the possibilities for searching are greatly broadened through the use of the computer. The computer can enable them to seek out, for example, individual words imbedded in a title or abstract of a book or article, or to limit their findings to a specific year of publication. Perhaps most important, an online search allows the combination of two or more distinct concepts in a single search (e.g. learning disabilities and college students), thus retrieving very specific search results.

POLL is, of course, a unique database, and while the fields available for searching differ from the usual bibliographic format, the same search concepts and strategies still apply.

Following the instructions in the User's Manual for POLL, which is distributed to subscribers, the researcher can execute a search with the knowledge of some basic commands. The following is a very brief explanation of the methodology used in searching POLL:

1. The basic command for searching the POLL database is the "FIND" command, which may be abbreviated as "FIN".
2. The searcher must indicate what kind of search is to be executed, by choosing from the fields, or "indices" available:
 SUBJECT: Topic(s) assigned to question
 WORD: Actual text of questions and responses
 ORGANIZATION: Organization conducting the study
 DATE: Beginning date of the study

Examples of the general form that a search might take are: FINd NAME OF INDEX ENTRY IN INDEX
 FIN WORD REAGAN
 FIN SUBJECT ETHICS
 FIN ORGANIZATION GALLUP
 FIN DATE 12/18/85

The User's Manual lists, in its appendices, all subject category codes and definitions, and organization codes. A cautionary note: subject categories are very broad, and searchers should not assume that their topic constitutes an official subject. For example, a search done on Reagan as "SUBJECT" will net zero hits, while the same search done in the "WORD" index will retrieve over 6,000 items.

3. Searchers may use the truncation symbol "#" to pick up all forms of a word. A search of the word "librar#" will find items

containing the words "library," "libraries," or "librarian."

4. The searcher must wait for an arrow to appear on the screen before entering a search. The prompt, "->" means that the system is ready for searching.

A simple search might look like this:

```
->> fin word librar#
-RESULT: 93 items
```

The above example constitutes the simplest kind of search that might be done in POLL. The system also supports more sophisticated search strategies, utilizing standard Boolean protocols (using AND, NOT, and AND NOT) to combine two or more search terms into a single statement:

```
->>fin word reagan and subject diplomacy
-RESULT: 62 items
```

Or, items may be "nested" within parentheses to indicate the order in which terms are to be searched. Ordinarily, the system searches items in the order in which they were entered, from left to right, and from top to bottom. Nesting terms makes the system search the items within parentheses first, and then combine the result with items outside the parentheses. Here is an example of a fairly complicated nesting strategy:

```
->>fin word boycott# and ((south and africa) or apartheid)
```

Searches may also be entered step-by-step. The same search might be done like this:

```
->>fin word south and africa
-RESULT: 17 items
->>or apartheid
-RESULT: 38 items
->>and boycott
-RESULT: 9 items
```


These examples just begin to touch on the possible search techniques that may be used to search POLL. POLL is designed to be flexible, and accurate search results may be obtained through many different avenues. This flexibility makes POLL a relatively easy database to access and search. With the aid of the User's Manual, and a little practice, researchers using POLL can achieve proficiency in a fairly short time.

Once a search is completed, the user may view the records on the screen by issuing a "TYPE" command. In order obtain hardcopy results of the search, the searcher may want to print the results directly, as the search results scroll by on the screen. In this case, it may be advisable to first "sort" the search results, eg. by date, by using POLL's "SEQUENCE" command, before entering "TYPE." Otherwise the records will be printed out in random order. Another possibility is to download the results directly to disk. These results can be edited later with any word-processing software that can handle a standard ASCII file. In the event that a search should result in an extremely large number of items, using these techniques may not be practical. The file can instead be printed at the Roper Center. The searcher issues the command ".POLLPR", sending the search result directly to the Roper Center, where it is printed and then mailed to the searcher. Roper Center does charge for this service, and rates vary according to the size of the file.

Conclusion

Rutgers University, a participating ISLA institution, has been a subscriber to POLL since September of 1986. Rutgers handles its POLI activities through the Alexander Library, the graduate library for social sciences and humanities research. The librarians at Alexander treat POLL like any other database,

doing searches on it at patron request, and charging a flat fee to cover some of the cost of connect time and telecommunication charges. Thus far, we have had two requests from graduate students in political science for POLL searches—one on South Africa and apartheid, and the other on the attitudes of gays on political elections. The reactions of these two students were favorable to POLL as a system, although the student researching the attitudes of gays found little relevant material in POLL.

As the coordinator of online reference services at Alexander Library, I do much of the database searching, and am the person most familiar with POLL. Overall, I find it extremely helpful in locating polling results—it is an easy-to-use resource, and it produces results far faster than paging manually through indexes. It is also a relatively inexpensive database, costing \$15.00 per hour of connect time for ISLA members. (In comparison, we often search databases on the DIALOG system which cost upwards of \$100.00 per hour of connect time, plus \$1.00 or more for each citation—and there are many databases which cost much more than this.) One minor drawback of POLL, financially speaking, is that it must be accessed directly in Storrs, Connecticut, rather than through a telecommunications network like TYMNET or TELENET, so telephone charges can be rather high. Still, when one considers the alternative of manual searching, POLL more than pays for itself.

I would also like to add that one of the chief strengths of POLL is the support that Roper Center gives to POLL users. New users are bound to have problems initially, with determining their software communications parameters, with bad phone lines, or with signing on to the system. At Alexander Library, we encountered all of these problems, and each time the technical staff at Roper analyzed our situation over the telephone, and coached us through to a solution. Anyone interested in

contacting the Roper Center with questions about POLL may do so by writing to Marilyn Potter, Assistant Director for User Services and Administration, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, P.O. Box 440, Storrs, CT 06268, or may call at (203) 486-4440.

*All background information on POLL was obtained directly from Marilyn Potter and Sterling Green, staff members at the Roper Center.□