Influencing Agendas:
Untangling The Reciprocal Effects of Polling Data and News Coverage on the Topics of Public Discourse

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ABSTRACT
Polls have become a fixture in contemporary news coverage. Not only do major media outlets report on the results of polls conducted by others, they also conduct their own polls through affiliated polling organizations. Journalists help to write the questions for those affiliated polls, while the pollsters conducting those polls help journalists to interpret the results. However, in spite of the high correlation between the topical agendas of polls and news reports, the general causal connections between the agendas of network-affiliated polls and network news coverage have not been thoroughly studied. This paper analyzes the reciprocal impact of the polling agenda and the news agenda for a broad range of issues across an entire decade to clarify the causal influences of these two agendas. In a case study of the relationships between CBS Evening News coverage and the questions asked in CBS/New York Times polls during the 1980–1989 period, we find that while the topical agenda of news coverage influences the agenda of public opinion surveys, the topical agenda of opinion surveys has little impact on the agenda of news discourse.

PRELIMINARY DRAFT USING INCOMPLETE DATA SET:
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In contemporary American political culture, polls have become a staple of journalistic coverage. Most major media outlets have invested in affiliated polling organizations to provide their journalists with access to proprietary polls which can provide more news value than the polls like Gallup that every news outlet can report (Mann and Orren 1992). The close connection between the news making process and the polling process at these major media outlets raises important questions, both theoretical and methodological, about the connection between the news agenda and the polling agenda. A thorough analysis of the potential causal connections between the news agenda and the polling agenda is needed to determine whether opinion surveys provide the mass public with a distinctive and independent voice in policy debates. The use of polls by news media has the potential to create new opportunities for popular concerns to influence the political agenda, a form of power which political philosophers often describe as a necessary form of popular sovereignty in democratic societies (e.g., Dahl 1989; Habermas 1996).

Understanding the causal connections between the news agenda and the polling agenda can also provide critical insights into important methodological issues underlying the survey research literature. Without a clear understanding of what sets the polling agenda and how the polling agenda affects the news agenda, assumptions about polls as either an indicator of political concerns or as a legitimate channel for the voice of the people become problematic: if polls merely reflect the topical agenda of recent news coverage, they cannot be an independent force in policy debates; but if polls fail to reflect the news agenda, they cannot be used as a measure that tells us which political issues are of contemporary public concern.

This paper offers a preliminary look at the causal connections between the news agenda and polling agenda in order to lay a foundation to answer, at least conditionally, these three questions:

- What is the polling agenda and how is it created?
- How does the polling agenda affect the news agenda?
How do the causal connections between the news agenda and the polling agenda square with the assumptions made about them by survey researchers and public opinion scholars?

First, the origins of the polling agenda need to be explicitly analyzed. Polls have come to be stand-ins for the public voice (Converse 1987). As Gallup himself wrote, the public opinion poll has become the substitute for “the practice of direct democracy which operated in the early town hall meetings of New England, or...the political intimacy of the rural general store with its cracker barrel” (Gallup and Rae 1940: 12). The construction of the public voice is a key concern for democratic theorists and scholars of public opinion alike (Althaus 2003). Democratic theorists are often concerned that the reliance of modern mass democracy on polls as a primary source of citizen input in the policymaking process restricts the role that citizens can play by making citizens into respondents rather actors in the political process (e.g., McAfee 2000; Bourdieu 1979; Habermas 1996; Ginsberg 1986). On the other hand, many scholars of public opinion have asserted that there can be a proper role for polling within the framework of modern mass democracy. When polls are properly conducted and properly used by journalists, politicians, and other political elites, the voice of the public can be clearly heard and can effectively help to steer the ship of state (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Testing this proposition requires analysis of the construction of the polling agenda. For example, if the polling agenda does not track all issues in the news agenda, then polls would be unable to reflect mass opinion in all areas.

Currently, there is no generalizable framework for predicting or understanding the construction of the public’s voice through the agenda of opinion polls. Research on the nature of mass opinion has focused almost exclusively on assessing the results of survey questions without investigating the more fundamental issue of why some questions rather than others come to be posed to citizens in the first place. As a consequence, despite much speculation, very little is known for certain about how news discourse and other factors influence the selection of topics
appearing in opinion polls, or about how the results of opinion polls conducted by news organizations influence subsequent reporting about the surveyed topics.

Second, we know little about the impact of the polling agenda on the news agenda. Many studies have dispelled the myth that politicians are slavish adherents to the latest poll results (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Monroe 1979, 1998). However, very little research has examined whether polls affect the content of news coverage, and this previous work has focused narrowly on either survey questions about particular issues (Dearing 1989; Groeling and Kernell 1998), the more general impact of horserace polls on election coverage (Craig 2000; Patterson 1993; Rhee 1996), or descriptive analysis of the way polling data are used in news coverage (Bennett and Klockner 1996; Paletz et al. 1980; Fitzgerald, Rule, and Bryant 1998). Only two studies have directly studied the agenda of poll questions in an attempt to untangle the causal ordering of news agendas and survey agendas, and these were limited to attention given to the AIDS issue in the 1980s (Dearing 1989) and the ways that changes in presidential approval ratings drove network news coverage of the president in the early 1990s (Groeling and Kernell 1998). The narrow scope of previous work on this subject has raised more questions than it has put to rest. Most previous studies have merely assumed that polls influence the news rather than testing this relationship directly, and the two exceptions focused on particular issues in these agendas rather than the complete agendas themselves. No study has examined the reciprocal impact of survey results on news coverage across a broad range of policy issues. This paper seeks to fill these gaps in the literature by examining every issue in the news and polling agendas across an entire decade to determine the causal connections between them.

Finally, understanding the causal connections between the polling agenda and the news agenda will provide new insights into methodological issues in public opinion research. A great deal of research on public opinion rests on the untested assumption that the questions posed in opinion surveys accurately represent the salient political issues of the day. For instance, Page and
Shapiro’s path-breaking (1992) *Rational Public* concluded, in contrast to the received wisdom, that the results of opinion surveys tend to be quite stable over time, and that when opinion shifts, it tends to do so gradually, in response to new information, and in meaningful ways. Page and Shapiro’s study generated widespread attention because they based their analysis on every publicly-available survey result that had been reported between 1935 and the late 1980s. Nonetheless, their celebrated findings about opinion change are not based on the full range of data at their disposal, but rather on two subsets of questions drawn from the work of five survey organizations: those asked at least twice over time, and those asked frequently enough to assess the fluctuation of opinion over time, amounting to just 173 of more than 6,000 questions asked by those organizations. Page and Shapiro found that less than a fifth of questions asked by these organizations had been repeated at least once, and their findings about the stability of collective opinion are based on this subset of questions. Yet, we might wonder whether this subset is a random sample of all topics appearing in their larger collection of survey data, for if it is not, if some topics were more likely than others to be asked in repeated surveys, as is probably the case, then the results of Page and Shapiro’s study might not generalize as broadly as they suppose.

A similar problem undermines the potential usefulness of Stimson’s (1991) measure of public mood, which has become a widely-used indicator of public opinion in large part because it can so readily be applied to any issue and any time period in the post-Second World War era. Stimson’s measure of public mood aggregates the results of all available survey questions in a given time period into a single measure of policy liberalism. Because this measure weighs topics that have been extensively surveyed more heavily than issues that have been infrequently surveyed, Stimson’s approach must presume (though it does not establish) that the mix of survey questions asked at any given time accurately reflects the salience of issues currently on the political agenda. If this is not the case, then researchers using this approach would be unable to aggregate the results of all questions without weighting them according to the actual political salience of each issue, a determination that would be nearly impossible to make. Stimson’s measure of policy mood has been challenged on precisely these grounds (Best 1999), and
alternate ways of selecting questions on the basis of political salience might well produce
different measures of policy mood. Answering these questions about the generalizability of
Stimson’s and Page and Shapiro’s path-breaking work requires a detailed understanding of how
some questions rather than others come to appear on the survey agenda.

We propose a simple model of agenda setting, outlined in Figure 1, that identifies
potential causal connections between the news agenda and the polling agenda. We hypothesize
that pre-poll values of the news agenda can predict both the polling agenda and the future news
agenda, while the polling agenda can predict future values of the news agenda. Measures of
lagged news content should be able to predict the polling agenda because the content of media
polls should reflect current topics of interest in the news. The strength of this causal relationship
will be affected by the extent to which the short-term influence of the lagged news agenda
predominates over longer-term influences, like efforts to maintain time-series trends on specific
issues or continued interest in coverage of issues over long periods of time (Crespi 1980; Atkin
and Gaudino 1984; Kovach 1980). We also hypothesize that the lagged news agenda will
significantly determine the future news agenda. In one sense this is self-evident, since news
coverage tends to move in “issue-attention cycles” (Downs 1972) that sustain interest in “big”
stories over extended periods of time. But our interest is in better understanding which of two
mechanisms might produce this tendency. Higher levels of news attention to a topic should tend
to generate more survey questions about the topic than lower levels, since news attention is in
part a function of audience interest and news organizations conduct polls in part to satisfy that
interest. But rising or falling levels of news attention to a topic should also influence the future
news agenda, since changes in news attention signal whether audience interest in a topic is likely
to be growing or fading: stories that are receiving rising levels of attention on the news agenda
are more likely to be carried on, while stories that have reached saturation levels are likely to be
discontinued. Finally, poll questions are hypothesized to have an independent influence on future
values of the news agenda, quite apart from any spurious covariance that comes from being
similarly influenced by the pre-poll news agenda. To justify the cost of maintaining affiliated
polling organizations, media outlets can be expected to give substantial attention to stories on which their own polling data are available (Crespi 1980; Atkin and Gaudino 1984; Kovach 1980; Mann and Orren 1992). Thus, high levels of attention to a topic in the media organization’s polling agenda should raise the level of attention given to that topic in its news coverage.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

We expect that the polling agenda can have both direct and indirect effects on the news agenda. First, the polling agenda could directly influence the number of post-poll stories containing survey results. This is likely to occur because news organizations want to highlight their own poll as a unique source of newsworthy information. It remains to be seen, however, whether a network’s own poll results increase the overall number of stories containing poll results, or merely displace poll results from other sources while leaving unchanged the overall agenda of stories using survey data. But direct effects are only part of the story, for most of the survey data collected by news organizations is probably never published. Nonetheless, these unpublished survey results are analyzed internally and distributed in newsrooms to inform the work of journalists and editors (Kovach 1980; Crespi 1980; Kagay 1991, 2000). Secondly, therefore, we test for indirect effects of the polling agenda on the topical distribution of stories in the post-poll news period, regardless of whether those stories mention survey results.

**Data and Methods**

Capturing the full range of survey data produced by and available to news organizations is thus essential for estimating the relationships between news discourse and survey questions. We therefore collected the full set of survey questions administered by the CBS/New York Times polling organization between 1980 and 1989. Our poll agenda data come from survey codebooks, archived at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, for all CBS/New York Times polls conducted during the 1980s. These codebooks were converted into a question database that includes every substantive survey question administered to national
samples of United States residents for the years 1980-84 and 1988-89 (n=3,666 questions). Because the ICPSR had few machine-readable codebooks for CBS/NYT polls conducted during 1985, 1986, and 1987, those years are currently missing in our dataset. (We plan soon to enter and code the poll data from these missing years.)

Our news agenda data come from the exhaustive record of CBS Evening News broadcasts maintained by the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. The Vanderbilt Archive creates abstracts of the stories in every news broadcast that it captures on local videotaping facilities. We obtained and coded the entire population of abstract entries for the CBS Evening News during the period from January 1, 1980, through December 31, 1989, but because our polling data are missing for the years 1985, 1986, and 1987, the analysis that follows omits news agenda data for those years. Although the Vanderbilt Abstracts provide the most comprehensive and systematic record of broadcast news content available in the United States, program preemptions cause the abstracts to miss a fraction of aired broadcasts. Of the 2,558 days included in the January 1, 1980 through December 31, 1984 and January 1, 1988 through December 31, 1989 periods, we have abstract data for 2,344 of those days. With roughly 8% of days missing abstracts, our level of missing data is almost exactly the same as the roughly 7% missing abstracts reported by Althaus et. al (Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2002: footnote 5) in their methodological analysis of the Vanderbilt abstracts.

Both sets of agenda data were coded by trained coders using an exhaustive typology of 52 issue categories adapted from the list originally proposed by McCombs and Zhu for coding the issue agenda of news broadcasts (McCombs and Zhu 1995). Each abstract and poll question was assigned a single issue code.Tests of intercoder reliability were conducted on a stratified random sample of 130 CBS Evening News broadcasts containing a total of 2,241 stories. Raw

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1 Survey variables created for survey administration purposes and questions asking demographic information were omitted from the database. All other questions, whether on political or nonpolitical topics, were retained and included in the database.
2 Most of these missing cases arise on weekends, when sporting events or other programs preempt the airing of national news broadcasts (see Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2002).
3 Coding rules, unitizing rules, and a detailed codebook are available from the authors upon request.
4 We chose to run the tests of intercoder reliability using news agenda data because the topical agenda of abstracts
agreement scores were very high (88.2% agreement on issue codes for individual abstracts, 99.5% agreement on the presence or lack of references to survey results in individual abstracts), and chance-corrected measures of intercoder reliability confirmed that the content analysis was extremely reliable (Cohens kappa = .88 and .83, respectively). For the analysis reported below, we aggregated the 52 issue codes into seven umbrella categories representing economics, elections, government, domestic policy, civil rights and moral issues, foreign policy, and all other (i.e., non-political) topics (see the detailed category list in the appendix). All news content variables reported below are counts of stories falling into each of these seven umbrella categories.

Several families of analytical models could be used to measure the relationships in Figure 1, and time-series models appropriate to count data (such as negative binomial regression) might seem especially well suited to the task. However, because most of these models are designed for continuous time series with cases representing discrete periods, they are less suitable for the poll question data. CBS/NYT polls were conducted on an average of 39 days apart, but this average masks substantial variation in the lag period between surveys (s.d. = 30.3 days; min = 1, max = 111). Thus most days and weeks contain no poll questions, and data overdispersion caused by this tendency, where standard deviations become larger than means, would tend to bias the results of standard time-series models (Gujarati 1995). Our solution is to move away from time series approaches altogether, and instead to use each occurrence of a poll as an observation of the hypothesized relationships in Figure 1. While this solution leaves us unable to model dynamics that influence the timing of news surveys (see Groeling and Kernell 1998), it greatly simplifies the presentation and interpretation of our findings.

Our data set for this analysis thus consists of 60 cases, one for each time a survey went into the field during the period of interest. Previous studies have used 10-day (Groeling and Kernell 1998) and monthly (Dearing 1989) lag periods to assess the impact of news agendas on was so much more complicated and difficult to code than that of the survey questions.
poll agendas, but there is no clear evidence on the optimal lag length for such an analysis. We tested a variety of lag lengths (7-day, 14-day, and 30-day lags) and found that 14-day lag periods provided the best fit to the data (in terms of adjusted R-square values). Therefore, the basic model we use below consists of the poll agenda on the day a survey first went into the field, the news agenda during a two-week period beginning three days after the poll went into the field, and the lagged news agenda from the two-week period immediately preceding the day that the poll went into the field.

**Findings**

During the seven years in the 1980-4 and 1988-9 period covered by our data, a total of 45,939 stories appeared on the CBS *Evening News*. The first column in Table 1 shows that the nearly half of all stories dealt with foreign policy issues. As might be expected during the waning years of the Cold War, nearly three-quarters of these foreign policy stories dealt with just four hot spots in the rivalry between superpowers: the Middle East (25% of foreign policy stories), Europe (16%), the Soviet Union (14%), and Central America (14%). After foreign policy stories, the next largest categories contained stories about domestic policy, the economy, and "other" topics that were non-political in nature (mainly human interest stories and disaster news).

In keeping with the findings of other studies (Bennett and Klockner 1996; Fitzgerald, Rule, and Bryant 1998), column 2 shows that the agenda of stories reporting poll results was quite different from the overall agenda of the news. In contrast to the overall news agenda, in which nearly half of stories dealt with foreign policy, nearly two thirds of stories using poll data were about elections, and most of these (52%) dealt narrowly with reporting horserace results from polls that tested the likelihood that candidates would win the election. Trailing far behind in

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5 The extra three days between the start of a poll and the beginning of the impact period in the news agenda is to account for the delay before the poll comes out of the field and is ready to report in the news. In our data, the median gap between the starting and ending day of a poll was three days (mean = 3.3 days, s.d. = 2.2 days; min = 0, max = 14).

6 For the entire decade, the comparable total is 59,978 news stories.
the agenda of stories using poll results, the next largest category dealt with foreign policy issues, and the remaining categories contained fewer than 10% of poll stories each. However, if we look at poll stories as the percentage of total stories in each topical category, a different picture emerges. Dividing the number of poll stories in column 2 by the total number of stories in column 1, we find that 12% of election stories and nearly 2% of stories on civil rights or moral issues used poll results, while fewer than 1% of stories in each of the remaining categories reported polling data.

The third column in Table 1 reports the topical agenda of questions included in CBS/NYT polls. The pattern in this column is nearly identical to that in the second column: election topics predominated the agenda of poll questions, followed distantly by government and foreign policy. As 69% of poll questions in our data set were asked during the presidential election years of 1980, 1984, and 1988, this finding is perhaps unsurprising: election polling allows news organizations to make news rather than merely report it, which gives them an important competitive advantage over their rivals. But it also underscores how narrow the typical uses of polling data tend to be in the CBS nightly news broadcasts.

The first relationship of interest in Figure 1 is the impact of the pre-poll news agenda on the topical agenda of the survey questionnaire. It is clear that the topics of a news organizations poll questions should be influenced by topics of recent of current interest in the news, but it is less clear to what degree the polling agenda is influenced by short-term factors rather than long-term considerations such as contributing new observations to established time-series trends. Table 2 shows that the polling agenda is more susceptible to short-term influences on some topics rather than others. We expect that topics with relatively high numbers of stories in the immediate pre-poll period will be more likely to transfer into the survey agenda than topics having small numbers of stories, because interest in these topics is already high. Thus the first independent variable in Table 2 is the number of news stories about the topic that appeared in the 14 days immediately proceeding the start of the poll. Likewise, if short-term factors have a large influence on the poll agenda, then rising levels of coverage given to a topic should help push the
topic onto the polling agenda, but falling levels of coverage, indicating waning attention to the topic, should help keep the topic off the polling agenda. If long-term factors are more prevalent in setting the polling agenda, then the short-term directional shifts in the news agenda should have no influence on the number of poll questions about a topic. To address these possibilities, a second independent variable captures the relative change in the number of pre-poll stories about a given topic compared to the 14-day period that began a month before the poll started.

**INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

Table 2 reveals that the news agenda has highly significant and positive effects on four of the seven topic areas: economy, elections, government, and foreign policy. The relative size of these effects is illuminating. Each election story in the two-week period before the poll goes to the field is found to add nearly one survey question on the topic of elections, a finding of little surprise given the large amount of election polling that was done by the CBS/NYT organization. Beyond that, it took roughly two stories about the economy or government to produce a single poll question on either of those topics, but nearly 10 foreign policy stories to produce one foreign policy question. Since foreign policy was the dominant topic in the news during the 1980s (see Table 1), this could indicate little more than a ceiling effect on the number of foreign policy questions that a poll could contain. But further analysis shows that the average poll during this period contained 5.7 (s.d. = 8.0) economic questions, 32.9 (s.d. = 31.8) election questions, 8.3 (s.d. = 7.8) government questions, 4.1 (s.d. = 5.9) domestic policy questions, 3.0 (s.d. = 4.2) civil rights or moral issue questions, and just 7.4 (s.d. = 6.4) foreign policy questions.7 There seems ample room for additional foreign policy questions, so the reasons why the poll agenda was less responsive to foreign policy stories than to other types of news coverage must rest in editorial decisions that limited the amount of polling done on this topic (Bennett and Klockner 1996). Since so few foreign policy stories reported poll results during this period (see Table 1 for CBS and more generally see Bennett and Klockner 1996), it is likely that editors decided either that

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7 The average poll also contained 1.8 (s.d. = 5.3) other (i.e., nonpolitical) questions.
there was little audience interest in seeing poll stories on foreign policy, or that soliciting the views of ordinary Americans was of limited value in understanding or analyzing foreign policy issues.

No significant short-term effects from the news agenda were found for the overall number of stories (last column) or for the specific topics of domestic policy, civil rights/moral issues, and other (i.e., nonpolitical) issues. It is possible that clearer agenda-setting relationships exist among the subtopics in the domestic policy and civil rights/moral issues categories, but we also think it likely that this lack of influence has more to do with the tendency for CBS/NYT to repeat the same questions over again for establishing baseline trends. As noted above, few questions on these topics were asked in the average poll, and the few that made it in seem to have disproportionately been used to track longer-term developments in public opinion (given the absence of a clear short-term relationship in Table 2).

It is also notable in Table 2 that while six of the eight coefficients for number of pre-poll stories have positive signs, six of the eight coefficients for lagged change in the news agenda have negative signs. In other words, higher levels of news attention to a topic tended to increase the number of poll questions about the topic, but rising levels of news attention to a topic tended to decrease the number of poll questions about the topic. This tendency for rising levels of news attention to reduce the number of poll questions on a topic is seen to greater or lesser degrees in all the analyses that follow. It is consistent with one or both of two explanations. First, longer term changes in the news agenda may be more important for influencing the polling agenda than short-term changes modeled here. We tested this possibility by re-estimating the equations using 30-day lag periods, but there were no consistent improvements in model fit, and all significant coefficients retained negative signs. It is still possible that the polling agenda is responsive to an even longer-term secular change in the news agenda. However, a second explanation is that the poll agenda is being influenced by decisions about what future topics are likely to be prevalent in the news. This would make sense given the need for media organizations to produce polling data that is timely and focused on current events. To test this, we re-estimated the equations in Table
by adding a variable capturing the post-poll change in the news agenda for each topic, but only for economic issues was this new variable a significant (and positive) predictor of the polling agenda. However, we recognize that this is an extremely crude way to test this possibility, and we must conclude only that we lack compelling evidence to support this second explanation.

If news organizations invest in poll data so that they can generate unique information unavailable to their competitors, then their interest in recouping this investment should be clearly seen when examining patterns in news stories that report survey results. We expected to find that the poll agenda should influence the number of news stories reporting poll results during the two weeks after the poll was conducted, and Table 3 reveals strong support for this hypothesis. The dependent variables in Table 3 are the number of news stories appearing during the two-week period following a poll that report poll data on a particular topic.

**INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

Every topical category save “other” shows at least marginally significant effects of the number of poll questions on the number of subsequent news stories. Translating these coefficients into substantive effects, the table indicates that between 14 (in the case of government) and 25 poll questions (for economy, elections, domestic policy and civil rights/moral issues) on a topic are required on average to generate an additional news story reporting polling data about that topic. Aggregating across all topics, the final column shows that poll results turn up in an average of one additional story for every 20 questions included in the poll. Since the average poll contained 64 substantive questions (s.d. = 32; min = 5, max = 193), this model estimates the average effect on the news agenda as about three additional stories reporting survey data during the two week period following the poll. Thus while the poll agenda does influence how many stories in the news will include poll results, on average these agenda-setting effects are quite small.

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8 Only one category produced nonsignificant results. Since Table 1 shows that only 7 stories out of nearly 50,000 reported polling data in "other" (i.e., non-political) stories, this "other" category is likely reflecting the networks use of its surveys for conducting market research activities or to generate information for programs other than the evening news. A large proportion of these "other" questions dealt with respondent opinions about the USFL professional football league, celebrities, betting on sports, and parent/child relationships.
The size of the poll effect for the government category is larger than the typical effect in this table, but this may be due merely to the high news value placed on presidential approval ratings and survey questions about political scandals, which together comprise nearly 70% of questions in the poll agenda in this category. It is interesting that the poll effect on election stories should be relatively small and only marginally significant, since that topic area is the most common of all the topics found in both the poll questions and the stories that report polling data. We suspect that the marginally significant effect of the polling agenda on that topic, along with the relatively low adjusted R-square value for that equation, indicate merely that election-related poll results have high news value whether they originate from the networks polls or from other sources. Internally-generated election poll results do have a small positive effect on the number of election stories reporting survey findings, but probably by displacing rather than supplementing survey data from other sources. In contrast, the economic category has a highly significant poll agenda effect along with a relatively high adjusted R-square, suggesting that the CBS/NYT polling agenda had a substantively larger effect on introducing survey data into news coverage of the economy. As 39% of the poll questions in this topical category dealt with general evaluations of the economy, particularly whether respondents felt the economy was going well or not, it becomes clearer why such strong effects should be registered for survey questions in this category.

The effects of the polling agenda on the number of news stories mentioning polls are significant but typically small. If the main effect of the poll agenda on news content is to increase the number of stories reporting poll data, then the patterns in tables 1 and 3 suggest that the news organization’s own internal polling data must have a limited impact on the news agenda. With nearly two thirds of poll stories focused on election issues, and the remaining poll stories comprising 1% or less of all stories within other topic categories, the direct impact of polls would appear to be small indeed.

Yet the indirect impact of polls could still be fairly large if a network’s internal polling agenda shaped its subsequent news coverage by influencing editorial decisions about which
topics to cover. Thus the polling agenda could have a small impact on the number of subsequent stories containing survey results, while still having a large impact on the total number of post-poll stories about a given topic area. However, we find only limited evidence for such an effect. Table 4 shows that only in the case of economic topics does the polling agenda have a significant impact on the total number of subsequent stories in the news. One additional economic story appears in the two-week post-poll period for every two questions about economic topics that appeared in the poll. In none of the other six topic areas was any similar relationship observed, nor was there any significant change in the overall number of post-poll stories in the news brought about by the total number of survey questions.9

**INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

Another pattern of interest in Table 4 is the direction of coefficients for the lagged news agenda. Nearly all are negative, reflecting the cyclical nature of the news agenda: this week’s hot topic quickly becomes last week’s old news, and vice-versa. In conjunction with the findings from Table 2, this pattern may help explain why the polling agenda has such a limited impact on both the number of subsequent stories reporting poll results and the total number of post-poll stories about the polled topics. Table 2 showed that the polling agenda in four of the seven topical categories was significantly influenced by the news agenda during the previous 14 days. However, because the post-poll news agenda tends to be negatively related to the pre-poll news agenda, the news value of the poll’s own agenda is substantially diminished by the time it comes back from the field. In other words, the news agenda tends to shift so quickly that the polling agenda tends to reflect "old news" topics. And by the time these "old news" topics again become newsworthy in the return swings of "issue attention cycles" (Downs 1972), the polls results are too dated to be newsworthy.

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9 The same pattern is observed when these equations are re-estimated using 30-day lag/lead periods, except that a marginally significant ($p = .07$) indirect effect of the polling agenda is found for foreign policy stories, where every poll question is estimated to produce 1.7 foreign policy stories over the 30-day post-poll period. However, this equation for the foreign policy agenda has a substantially smaller adjusted R-square value (.19) than is the case for the 14-day lag/lead equation in table 4 (adjusted R-square = .28). We therefore conclude that the equations in Table 4 provide the best estimates of the polling agendas indirect effect on the number of stories in the news agenda.
Figure 2 summarizes in graphical form the significant agenda-setting effects found in tables 2, 3, and 4. The top chart is simply a visual representation of the significant coefficients of interest that were reported in those tables. In each topic area, the black bars show the unit change in the number of additional questions appearing in a poll that come from the appearance of a single news story in the pre-poll period. The grey and white bars show the unit change in the number of post-poll news stories reporting poll results (grey bars) and the total number of post-poll news stories about a topic (white bars) that come from including a single poll question on the topic. This comparison underscores visually what has already been discussed: the effects of the poll agenda on the news agenda appear to be very small, while the effects of the news agenda on the poll agenda appear to be very large. However, this comparison obscures just how large and just how small, for poll questions and news stories rarely appear in equal numbers.

The lower chart in Figure 2 addresses this inequity by displaying the average change in each agenda predicted by our models, where the effect coefficients are multiplied by the average number of poll questions in each poll or the average number of news stories about a topic in each pre-poll period. To simplify this comparison, for this chart we have set the value of pre-poll changes in the news agenda to zero. Once we correct for the fact that more news stories tend to appear in the pre-poll period than there are questions in a poll, we see that their relative effects are even more divergent than it might seem. The average pre-poll news agenda is estimated to add 15 economic questions, 14 foreign policy questions, 12 election questions, and 10 government questions to the survey agenda. In contrast, the average poll agenda is estimated to add just less than 3 economic stories to the post-poll news agenda, and to produce coverage of poll results in just one election story and far less than one story from each of the other topic areas. These average effects are themselves somewhat misleading, since most election stories should be in election years and the average poll was found to contain fewer than the predicted 14 foreign policy questions, but they nonetheless clarify the main finding to arise from this study:
however one looks at it, the aggregate polling agenda has very little impact on the aggregate news agenda.

**Conclusion**

This study fills a gap in the literature by studying the relationship between the news agenda and poll agenda using all topics appearing in the news and in polls. Deering (1989) looked narrowly at this relationship on the topic of AIDS, while Groeling and Kernell (1998) studied it only for the case of job approval questions in coverage of the presidency. Our dataset covering all poll questions asked by the CBS/New York Times polling organization and all stories covered by the CBS Evenin News from 1980 to 1989 allows for a thorough exploration of the relationship between the news agenda and the polling agenda. This study lays the groundwork for understanding the role that polls play both as an indicator of political concerns and as a communication channel for the mass public to make its collective opinions known.

This paper reveals that while the news agenda has a powerful influence on the topical distribution of survey questions in a news organization’s own polls, the topical distribution of survey questions has little unique impact on the relative prominence of different topics in the news. Survey results produced by a news organization do not tend to take on a life of their own. Instead, their appearance in the news and their indirect impact on the topics of news coverage is usually dictated by the larger tides of news attention that they already reflect. As Figure 2 clearly illustrates, the polling agenda has little impact on the news agenda. Media polls have a small effect on the number of news stories containing poll results, but generally do not increase the number of stories devoted to a topic. The large financial commitments made in polls by media organizations therefore does not seem to influence the topics of news attention, despite concerns that the tight relationship between a network’s news and polling operations might create pressures to report on an organization’s survey findings to a greater extent than might be warranted (Crespi 1980; Kovach 1980; Mann and Orren 1992). As noted above, this result is probably due to the reduced news value for poll results that come from the delay between when a
survey is sent into the field and when its findings are ready to be reported. Journalists generally need that information today, not three days from now.

These findings have implications for the long-standing debate about the democratic potential of polls. If, as Gallup and others have argued, polls are an important channel for inserting the public’s voice into policy debates, then the practice of polling could potentially have some strong effects on news content, including affecting what gets talked about when. Our analysis suggests that surveys are more likely to be influenced by news coverage than to shape that coverage independently of other factors. Some democratic theorists will breathe a sigh of relief at these results, but in the absence of strong effects on the part of polls, questions remain about how exactly the public’s voice does affect the news agenda, which can be seen as a reflection, albeit an imperfect one, of the public’s own concerns. In general, polls appear not to fulfill the hopes of some who expect them to serve as a viable, strong vehicle for the public voice in modern mass democracy.

The impact of the news agenda on the polling agenda varied greatly by topic area. For the economy, elections, government, and foreign policy, the news agenda had a highly significant effect on the polling agenda. But in topics where the questions seem to be more often repeated to establish baseline trends, such as domestic policy and civil rights/moral issues, there was no significant effect. In some areas the polling agenda appears to be significantly affected by the news agenda, while in others more long term interests on the part of the media organizations seem to be at work.

More investigation is needed on what determines the overall polling agenda. Our results suggest that the construction of the polling agenda may differ by subject area. Thus, it seems problematic to assume that the questions repeated over time are a random sample of surveyed issues or an accurate reflection of currently salient issues. The polling agenda seems to be divided into two types of topics: a group of topics that reflect short term changes in news salience, and a group of topics that reflect longer term interests of the news organization. This
suggests that researchers cannot assume that the agenda of survey questions is a representative sample of salient political issues either in the news or on the minds of mass publics.

The generalizability of these results also has some important limitations. Among them:

- We examine only a single news organization over a limited period of time. It is possible that these patterns are idiosyncratic as a result.

- Our focus here is narrowly on comparing agendas, which leads us to ignore completely the potential that survey results have more subtle effects on the framing of news stories or on the terms of political discourse.

- We compare news and polling agendas at a high level of aggregation. It is possible that there are stronger agenda-setting relationships when these agendas are disaggregated to specific issues within each topical category. However, the limited amount of polling data within each subcategory makes it difficult for us to test for these possibilities.

- This preliminary examination of the data only includes seven years in the 1980s, so it is an incomplete record of a tumultuous time in American politics. Our findings about the impact of the polling agenda on economic news may be limited to this decade, which had severe recession, high unemployment, and inflation problems.

- The types of poll questions asked on these issues also leant themselves to higher levels of impact. Many of the questions were asking either about direct experience of inflation or unemployment or perceptions of the economy rather than prescriptive policy preferences. The softer, more personal focus probably increased the news values of the results, because they better fit the dramatic frames journalists try to employ. The relationship between the polling agenda and the economic agenda might disappear when the issue is less pressing or when the types of poll questions change.

- More work is needed to see if this kind of relationship between the poll agenda and the news agenda shifts across topic areas as the major problems facing the country
shift. Thus, a similar relationship might be found in the domestic policy area—or at least subtopics of that area—for the 1990s when economic problems were alleviated for a time and attention shifted to topics like welfare reform and health care. More research is needed to address this possibility.

These limitations constitute important directions that future research on this topic should investigate. Answers to these questions will shed needed light on the long-standing theoretical debates about the democratic potential of polls. Some defend the opinion survey as a vehicle that can uniquely extend the influence of the people throughout the policymaking process, while many others argue that the polling process restricts the ability of citizens to engage freely in debate and thus limits the role of the people to one of legitimation of elite opinions. Further empirical analysis of the causal relationships between the polling agenda and the news agenda will help us clarify how survey results might influence the agenda of mass mediated deliberation in the news.

**References**


Figure 1: Hypothesized Relationships between News Agenda and Poll Agenda
Table 1: Topical Agenda of CBS Evening News, CBS/NYT Polls, and Stories Reporting Results from Any Opinion Poll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>CBS Evening News Stories</th>
<th>CBS Evening News Stories Reporting Results from Any Poll</th>
<th>CBS/NYT Poll Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>11.9 (5,472)</td>
<td>4.3 (26)</td>
<td>8.9 (326)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>7.1 (3,276)</td>
<td>63.7 (389)</td>
<td>52.2 (1,915)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>8.0 (3,683)</td>
<td>8.8 (54)</td>
<td>13.0 (477)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Policy</td>
<td>14.7 (6,764)</td>
<td>8.7 (53)</td>
<td>6.5 (238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights/Moral Issues</td>
<td>2.6 (1,188)</td>
<td>3.8 (23)</td>
<td>4.7 (171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy</td>
<td>43.5 (19,999)</td>
<td>9.7 (59)</td>
<td>11.9 (438)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.1 (5,557)</td>
<td>1.1 (7)</td>
<td>2.8 (101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>100.0 (45,939)</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0 (611)</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0 (3,666)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: cells contain column percentages with number of stories/questions in parentheses.
Table 2: Predicting Number of Poll Questions, by Topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Elections</th>
<th>Gov’t</th>
<th>Domestic Policy</th>
<th>Civil Rights and Moral Issues</th>
<th>Foreign Policy</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All Topics Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∆ in # of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.06*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-8.96*</td>
<td>10.10*</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>4.16**</td>
<td>-6.91*</td>
<td>4.79†</td>
<td>20.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R–squared</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cells contain unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. All models use 14–day lag/lead periods.

† two-tailed p < .10  * two-tailed p < .05  ** two-tailed p < .01
Table 3: Predicting Changes in the Number of News Stories that Report Results from Any Poll, by Topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of News Stories that Report Poll Data on</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Elections</th>
<th>Gov't</th>
<th>Domestic Policy</th>
<th>Civil Rights and Moral Issues</th>
<th>Foreign Policy</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All Topics Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Poll Questions on Topic</td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td>.04†</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.04†</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>.02*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ in # of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.78**</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R–squared</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cells contain unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. All models use 14–day lag/lead periods. † two-tailed $p < .10$ * two-tailed $p < .05$ ** two-tailed $p < .01$
### Table 4: Predicting Changes in Number of News Stories, by Topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Elections</th>
<th>Gov’t</th>
<th>Domestic Policy</th>
<th>Civil Rights and Moral Issues</th>
<th>Foreign Policy</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All Topics Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Poll Questions on Topic</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>–.22</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>–.18</td>
<td>–.43</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>–.52**</td>
<td>–.21†</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>–.71**</td>
<td>–.61**</td>
<td>–.28*</td>
<td>–.26†</td>
<td>–.16†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ in # of Pre-Poll News Stories on Topic</td>
<td>–.24†</td>
<td>–.14</td>
<td>–.39*</td>
<td>–.02</td>
<td>–.03</td>
<td>–.17</td>
<td>–.23*</td>
<td>–.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>14.20**</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>–2.47</td>
<td>25.21**</td>
<td>5.00**</td>
<td>30.47*</td>
<td>9.38†</td>
<td>33.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R–squared</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cells contain unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. All models use 14–day lag/lead periods. 
† two-tailed \( p < .10 \)  * two-tailed \( p < .05 \)  ** two-tailed \( p < .01 \)
Figure 2: Summary of Predicted Effects

a. Predicted Unit Impact

b. Predicted Average Impact