

AMERICAN AND GERMAN ELITE JOURNALISTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ELECTION POLLS

Wolfgang Wichmann and Frank Brettschneider

ABSTRACT

Opinion polls are a highly prominent feature in today's reporting on election campaigns. But the relationship between journalists and opinion polls in the U.S. and Germany has been described as a rivalry in the past. This study presents results of two surveys that were carried out among American and German elite journalists. For the first time this study provides quantitative statements about the opinion of White House correspondents toward opinion polls and how they use poll results in their day-to-day business. Compared to results of a 2005 survey among members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* in Germany, this study reveals relevant similarities but also important differences between the attitudes of elite journalists in the two countries. In a nutshell, the findings lead to the conclusion that White House correspondents as well as members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* have a more confident than skeptical attitude toward scientific polling and the use of political poll results in their work. Even more, the results show that White House correspondents have a more confident attitude than their German colleagues.

"The polls have changed journalism, just as the organization of press associations did, just as the advent of half-tone photo engravings did, just as the rise of the columnists and commentators did," Eugene Meyer, publisher of the *Washington Post* stated euphorically in 1940 (Meyer 1940, p. 240). The *Post* was the first subscriber of the Gallup Poll, marking the beginning of a new era for the relationship between journalists and pollsters. For journalists, polls fulfill many functions: for example as information sources, as attention-getters, and as a source of journalistic power (Frankovic, 1998, p. 162). "Polls are newsworthy: they are topical, relate directly to issues in the news, are up-to-the-moment" (Paletz *et al.*, 1980). Because of their high news value, public opinion polls have increasingly become a standard feature in news reporting over the last decades. According to a worldwide study in 78 countries by

Röhme (1997, p. 5), opinion polls were published “practically every day” or “regularly” in the major news media—most frequently in newspapers.

Over the years, reporting on election polls¹ has increased significantly in almost all Western democracies (Brettschneider, 2008). However, pollsters have often also criticized the quality of poll reporting (Röhme, 1997, p. 5). Problems addressed by scholars include the publication of unprofessional poll findings (such as TV studio audience polls or call-in polls), the over-interpretation or misleading interpretations of poll findings by journalists, and a poor documentation of polls. Another problem is the so-called “horse-race journalism”—the use of polls in an election campaign to stress entertainment instead of concentrating on political issues (Brettschneider, 2008).

Whereas pollsters are responsible for developing accurate snapshots of public opinions at a given time, journalists are responsible for the reporting of poll results to the public. Lavrakas and Traugott (1995, p. 4) describe the important role of journalists in this process: “The news media’s usage of information gathered via sample surveys, and in particular via election polls, can be extremely interesting and informative to a society and can produce a more informed electorate thereby improving the democratic process.” Yet the value and possible impacts of polls are discussed frequently and often heatedly, especially among politicians and mass communication scholars.

Though polls provide important information for voters in democracies, they have also been criticized for having a negative influence on voting decisions. Up to the present day, no studies exist in which election poll results have shown any relevant impact either on election outcome or on the process of the election decision making (Hardmeier, 2008; Brettschneider, 2003). However, the publication of political poll results on, or immediately prior to election day, is limited by legal restrictions in several countries around the globe (Spangenberg, 2003).

With all this said, research has widely neglected one aspect of the field: What are the attitudes of journalists toward opinion polls? And what are the journalists’ opinions about publishing opinion poll results? Whereas some studies have focused on the relationship between journalists and opinion polls, few used a systematic approach (Weaver, 2008; Weaver *et al.*, 2007; Donsbach & Antoine, 1990). Most relevant studies analyzed the content of pre-election poll reports and drew conclusions about how journalists view polls. The widely spread assumption is: One reason for the increase in media’s use of opinion polls lies in the changing relationship between pollsters on the one side, and journalists, as well as news organizations, on the other.

¹This article’s focus is on the journalists’ attitudes toward “election polls”. Since the U.S. journalists were surveyed around the time period of the General Elections in November 2006, it sometimes seemed feasible to use the term “political polls”.

This relationship changed from competition and conflict at the beginning of the 1930s to a “symbiotic” relationship today.

As Roper (1980, p. 46) puts it, “newsmen a few decades ago saw polling as competitive, as an invasion of the newsman’s function and prerogatives. As a result, the news media avoided publishing or airing poll results as much as possible”. After decades of using “syndicated polls” by institutes like Gallup for media reports, Roper concluded that journalists changed their attitudes towards scientific polls in the 1970s when many media outlets set up their own survey units. Influential as well, was Philip Meyer’s book *Precision Journalism: A Reporter’s Introduction to Social Science Methods*, published in 1973. Meyer encouraged an increased use of statistics and poll results in day-to-day journalism.

Today, the news media are one of the main clients of polling firms—or they conduct polls on their own. Therefore, the relationship between news organizations and pollsters in the U.S. can be described best as “joint venture of ascertaining and reporting public opinion” (Ladd, 1980, p. 576). Similar developments can be found in other Western democracies—such as Australia (Smith III & Verrall, 1985), Canada (Andersen, 2000), Finland (Suhonen, 2001), Germany (Brettschneider, 1997), Great Britain (Worcester, 1991), Israel (Weimann, 1990), and Switzerland (Hardmeier, 1999).

Similar to the U.S., the relationship between journalists and opinion polls in the past has been described as a rivalry in Germany. Compared to the role perception of their American colleagues, German journalists tend to act rather political and are mostly seen as being aware of their power of publication (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Köcher, 1986). Therefore, one can assume an open conflict: “Public opinion research has taken a century-old responsibility from journalism: the publication of the public opinion. Public opinion research became a competitor for the agenda setting monopoly of journalism—the responsibility of picking something out as a central theme for the public attention” (Noelle-Neumann, 1980, p. 4). The publisher of the German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, Rudolf Augstein (1974, p. XVIII), described opinion polling as *gefräßigtes Brüderchen*. He used the metaphorical image of a little brother with a ravenous appetite to depict his understanding of opinion polling, which was again stealing relevant shares of the media’s monopoly on publishing the public opinion.

However, polling results will offer the opportunity of criticism, if today, journalists state that they are in fact mapping public opinion and mirroring reality. Their representation of assumed diversification of opinions among the population can be adjusted, if necessary, and thus, opinion polling in that sense can be attributed a control-function over the media coverage. Noelle-Neumann (1989) even describes public opinion polling as an instrument for correcting the so-called “media reality”, *i.e.*, the type of reality that is initially

created by the media coverage of the "real" reality. Opinion polling is portrayed as a suitable measure for adjusting incorrect perceptions about the population's majority opinion on certain issues. In other words: To German journalists, opinion polling for a long time contained two aspects aiming in opposite directions—the positive aspect of high news value of poll results on the one hand, and the negatively perceived possibility of having a new control measure for their work on the other. The decision of what aspect finally outweighs the other is

linked directly to the role-perception of the individual journalist... A journalist who sees his duty in influencing the public opinion in the first place, is more likely to fear polling results; whereas a journalist who considers himself more as a neutral news-broker or a mouthpiece for spreading the public opinion, is more likely to hail opinion polling (Donsbach, 1986, p. 16).

Based on the literature review and analyses about how the media report about election polls, one should expect some differences in the attitudes towards polls between elite journalists in the U.S. and Germany. As mentioned, the data about media reports show significant differences between the U.S. and Germany: In the U.S., the media reports more often and more detailed about election polls.

In general, media content is the product of (a) the available information (the input in the journalistic system), (b) the institutional setting, (c) the perceived interest of the newspaper readers and TV viewers, and (d) the attitudes of the journalists themselves. Regarding the published election polls, the differences between the U.S. and Germany reflect a longer tradition of public opinion polling as well as a much greater amount of available polling data in the U.S. (the input). The differences also reflect a relationship between the media and the pollsters that developed over decades into a symbiosis—as described by involved actors on both sides of the game (the setting). And the differences should reflect varying attitudes that journalists have about opinion polls. Due to the lack of empirical data so far, we simply do not know how journalists on both sides of the Atlantic think about election polls. But with the content analysis data in mind, we can assume that U.S. journalists perceive a higher interest of their readers/viewers in opinion poll results than German journalists. Therefore, U.S. journalists should consider poll results more newsworthy than German journalists. Because of the longer tradition of precision journalism, U.S. journalists may rate technical details about polls more relevant to publication than German journalists. Last but not least, U.S. journalists may have more polling-friendly attitudes than German journalists regarding (a) a possible impact of poll results on voting behavior, (b) the danger of manipulation of poll results by polling institutes, and (c) a ban on the publication of pre-election poll results.

There are two main reasons why the attitudes of German and American elite journalists need to be compared: First, for both countries the media reports about election polls is content analyzed rather well (see above). Second, comparative studies about journalists place German and U.S. journalists on the opposite sides of a continuum regarding the journalists' role in political reporting – with other countries (as Great Britain, Italy or Sweden) in between (Donsbach & Patterson, 1996).

METHOD

To comparatively investigate the attitudes of U.S. and German journalists toward political polls and the publication of poll results, three surveys with identical questions were carried out:

1. Prior to the election of the German parliament Bundestag in 2002, a survey questionnaire was sent out to 713 members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* (Federal Press Conference). Three-hundred and eighty-two sent back a completed questionnaire (response rate = 54 percent).
2. Prior to the election of the German Bundestag in 2005, the same questionnaire was sent out to 659 members of the *Bundespressekonferenz*. Three-hundred and twenty-five sent back a completed questionnaire (response rate = 49 percent).
3. Immediately after the U.S. midterm elections for Congress and Senate in 2006, a survey questionnaire was sent out to 114 members of the White House press corps. Thirty-three sent back a completed questionnaire (response rate = 29 percent).

The composition of the participating journalists in regard of age and media affiliation overall resembled the general composition of the related universe—with a majority working for print media, followed by television journalists, wire-service reporters and radio journalists. The response rate of 29 percent for the White House press corps is low. And since the response rate is generally considered to be the most important indicator of survey quality, this is an aspect that the readers should be especially aware of. While drawing our conclusions we remained sensitive to the low response rate. Since there are only fewer cases available for analysis, the precision of our estimates is certainly limited. However, major trends and differences in our findings seemed valid to our perception. And since journalists are hard to survey, low response rates for journalists' surveys have been reported before: For example, in their survey of German and French journalists, Donsbach and Antoine achieved response rates of 36 and 21 percent. They concluded that “a sample bias, should it exist, would be in the direction of more favorable attitudes toward

polls as compared to the attitudes of the total population of journalists" (Donsbach & Antoine, 1990, p. 168).

The results of the survey among members of the White House press corps are compared with results of the survey that was carried out among journalists of the German association *Bundespressekonferenz* in 2002 and again in 2005. Both groups of journalists cover the most important political issues and personalities either in the U.S. or in Germany and their members are therefore perceived as elite journalists. Both groups of journalists are considered experienced and well-educated journalists who cover a prestige beat. The opinions of these journalists, who have, among their colleagues, been extensively socialized over the years, promise an interesting picture of how journalists, involved in political communication, think about political polls.

Surveying the members of the White House press corps is especially complicated, since an official list of who is actually a member of the corps is not available. Despite the fact that the White House press room provides assigned seats to the most important local, regional, and national media outlets, as well as to reporters of major wire services, far more journalists are accredited to the White House than there are journalists who are considered members of the White House press corps. For his research, Hess tried to separate the "regulars" from the other Washington correspondents who have White House credentials. Hess (1992, p. 312) described these journalists as those "who have assigned seats at the press secretary's daily briefing, a desk in the press room, and who usually travel with the president". According to Kumar and Sullivan (2003, p. 68), regulars are also described as those "who show up every day and spend most of their time in the Executive Mansion". Between the late 1970s and 2003, the number of regulars ranged about 60–75 (Hess, 1992; Campbell & Cochran, 2003). For our research, we used a sample of 114 journalists who appeared as White House correspondents either on a list that was provided by *Washington Post* author Dan Froomkin or in an official media database. After analyzing their job descriptions, we ended up with 114 journalists who we considered to be experts on White House topics.

The *Bundespressekonferenz* is a registered journalist association in the German capital of Berlin and in the former capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn. Journalists within the association form an administration that organizes press conferences with leading representatives from politics, economics, and culture. Following a fixed schedule, the government spokesperson and the departments' spokespersons appear at least three times a week in the hall of the Federal Press Corps building in Berlin to give statements on recent issues and answer questions relating to political events.

The questionnaire that was used for the survey of German journalists was translated into English and altered appropriately for the American journalists. Among others, it covers the following aspects:

1. How do journalists perceive the public’s interest and the interest of their colleagues in political survey results?
2. How much interest do journalists assign to the reporting of technical information about surveys and how often do they use surveys in their daily reports?
3. How do journalists think about the possible influence of survey results on voters’ final decisions in elections and do they consider these influences good or bad?
4. How do journalists think about regulations that would ban the publication of survey results immediately before election days in order to prevent possible influences on voters’ decisions?

Since the surveys among German journalists in 2002 and 2005 resulted in almost identical findings, this study only compares the 2005 findings to the results of the survey among U.S. journalists.

RESULTS

PERCEIVED PUBLIC’S AND COLLEAGUES’ INTEREST IN OPINION POLLS

As expected, the U.S. journalists assume a greater interest among their audience toward poll results. While 87 percent of the U.S. journalists expected their readers/viewers to express “much” or “very much” interest in results of political polls, only 52 percent of the German journalists expected a similar interest among their audience (Table 1).

The survey results also show that a predominantly positive attitude among White House correspondents exists about the use of political polls and poll results. Three out of four American journalists answered that their colleagues

TABLE 1 Perceived public’s interest in political polls, 2005 and 2006/2007 (in percent of all respondents)

	<i>Germany</i> (<i>N</i> = 325)	<i>USA</i> (<i>N</i> = 32)
Very little	0	0
Little	6	0
Undecided	42	13
Much	48	81
Very much	4	6

Question wording: “In your opinion: How much are your readers (viewers) interested in results of political polls?”

TABLE 2 Perceived colleagues' opinion about political polls, 2005 and 2006/2007 (in percent of all respondents)

	<i>Germany</i> (<i>N</i> = 325)	<i>USA</i> (<i>N</i> = 32)
Rather negative	14	6
Undecided	30	19
Rather positive	56	75

Question Wording: "In your opinion: What do your colleagues generally think about the usage of political survey results in the media?"

have a positive attitude toward the use of political poll results in their reports, while only two out of 32 journalists believed that their colleagues might have a negative attitude about the use of poll results (Table 2).

The members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* are, to some extent, more skeptical towards political survey results. German journalists have lower expectations regarding their colleagues' attitudes towards the use of political survey results than White House correspondents. In Germany, almost 60 percent of the journalists see a somewhat positive attitude among their colleagues toward the use of political survey results in their publications compared to 75 percent of the American journalists who think the same way.

JOURNALISTS' COVERAGE OF ELECTION POLLS

The results of content analysis about the quantity and quality of reporting on poll results are reflected in the White House correspondents' answers about their use of opinion polls as well. Almost 88 percent of the U.S. respondents—compared to only 62 percent of the German journalists—answered that they used survey results "sometimes" or "often" as basic information for an article or report. All American journalists answered that they "sometimes" or "often" use survey results as additional information for an article or report – compared to only 76 percent in Germany (Table 3).

U.S. journalists not only use poll results more often for their reports than German journalists; they are also more inclined to include technical details about polls in their articles. In 1969, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) published a list of information which responsible pollsters should provide to the media/readers with every published survey. In the surveys among White House correspondents and members of the *Bundespressekonferenz*, the journalists were asked how much and what type of information they were likely to include in a report about political survey results.

Studies that use the AAPOR guidelines as a reference point have been carried out in the U.S. (Paletz *et al.*, 1980; Miller & Hurd, 1982; Weaver &

TABLE 3 Polls results as basic and additional information, 2005 and 2006/2007
(in percent of all respondents)

	Germany		USA	
	<i>Polls as basic information</i>	<i>Polls as additional information</i>	<i>Polls as basic information</i>	<i>Polls as additional information</i>
Never	6	4	3	0
Seldom	30	21	9	0
Sometimes	43	51	63	50
Often	21	25	25	50

Question wording: “How often do you use survey results as basic information for your articles or reports?”
“How often do you use survey results as additional information in a report about political issues, elections, parties or politicians?”

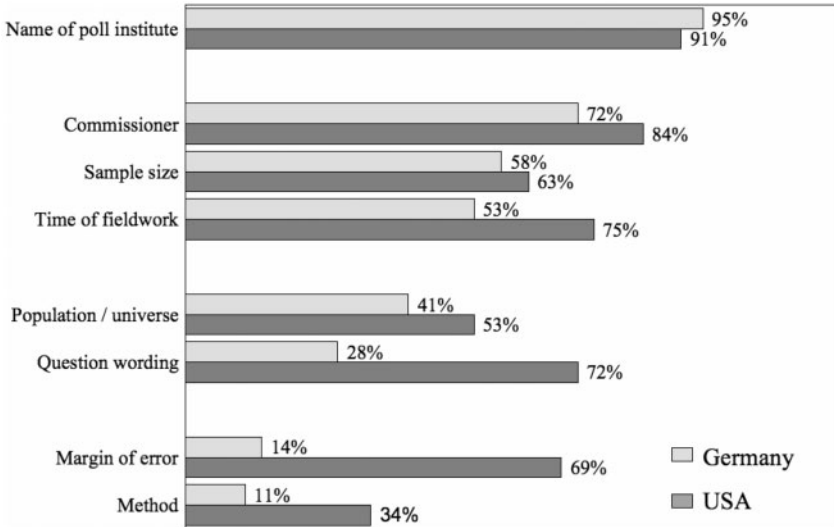
Sung, 2002), Germany (Brettschneider, 1997), Canada (Andersen, 2000), Switzerland (Hardmeier, 1999), Israel (Weimann, 1990), and Finland (Suhonen, 2001). To differing degrees, these studies found room for improvement in poll reporting and call for better education of journalists in regard to opinion polling. Also, critics tried to emphasize the differences between journalistic and academic goals in poll reporting. Whereas scholars like Rollberg *et al.* (1990) argued that a high number of AAPOR criteria would improve the quality of poll reports; in 1991 former journalist Meyer and *USA Today* editor Jurgensen argued for the opposite and suggested that too much technical information might in fact decrease the quality of poll reports.

According to the responses, the White House correspondents would include, on average, 5.4 AAPOR criteria, if writing a report about political survey results. Compared to the average amount of AAPOR criteria found in newspaper articles (between three and four), this number seems high. The answers of the journalists in Germany were more consistent with the actual number of criteria included in articles. According to the answers of 325 journalists, they would include an average of 3.7 AAPOR criteria, if writing an article about political survey results.

The name of the responsible poll institute seems the most important information in both countries (Figure 1). Ninety-one percent of the White House journalists and 95 percent of the German journalists would include at least the name of the institute that conducted the poll, if writing a poll report. Eighty-four percent of the White House correspondents answered that they would also include the name of the company/institution that commissioned the poll (72 percent in Germany), if writing an article about poll results.

The biggest differences between the American and German journalists are found in including the margin of error, the exact wording of the questions asked, and the time when the fieldwork for the survey was done. The White

FIGURE 1 Reported importance of methodological information, 2005 and 2006/2007
Question Wording: "Suppose you are working on an article or report for your newspaper (station) that will mention political survey results: What kind of information would you include in your report? (multiple answers are allowed): name of the poll institute that conducted the poll, question wording, definition of population for which the survey is representative, number of respondents, time when the survey was done, institution that commissioned the poll, margin of error of results, Method (personal interview, telephone interview...)"

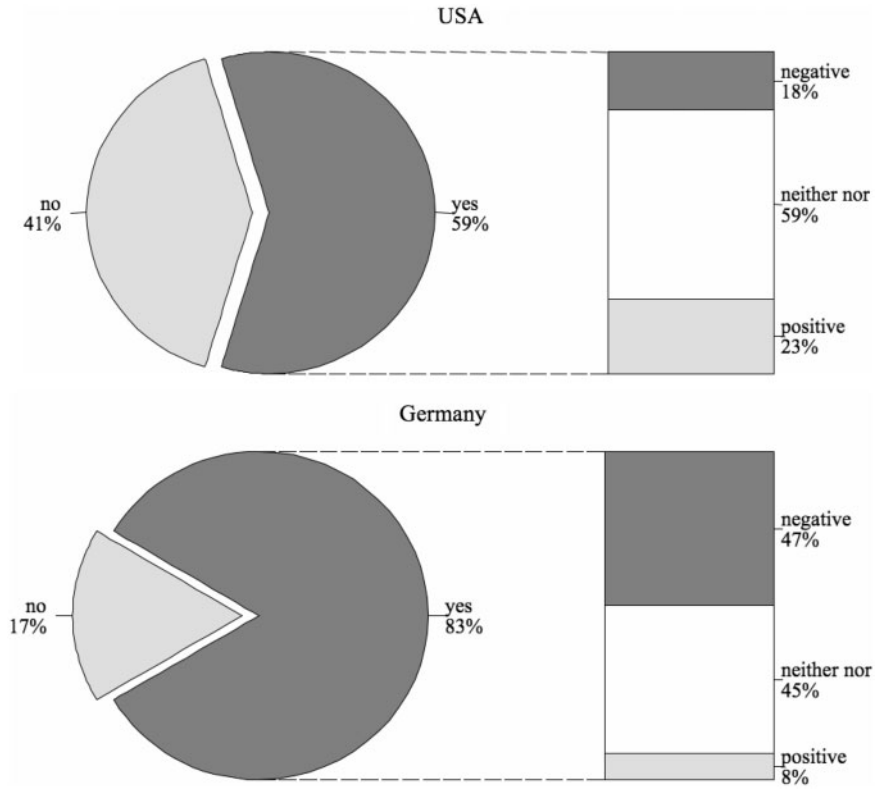


House correspondents were much more likely to include the margin of error (69 percent of the American journalists compared to 14 percent of the German journalists), the question wording (72 vs. 28 percent), and the time of fieldwork (75 vs. 52 percent).

The number of AAPOR criteria that the Germans said they would include in survey reports, if writing a poll report, differs significantly among the different types of media outlets. Using a one-way ANOVA analysis, it was determined that journalists working for wire services are significantly more likely to include more technical information about polls (average of 4.76 criteria per report, $p = .002$) than all other colleagues working for daily newspapers (3.73 criteria), radio (3.70 criteria), weekly newspapers/magazines (3.60 criteria), and television (3.27 criteria). For the White House correspondents the same trend seems to apply, although the low number of respondents did not allow for a test of statistically significant relationships. However, journalists working for a wire service were more likely to include a higher of number of AAPOR criteria in their reports (6.67 criteria) than journalists working for a television station (5.00 criteria).

FIGURE 2 Perceived influence of political poll results on voters' decision, 2005 and 2006/2007

Question Wording: "Some people say that the publication of political survey results immediately before elections could influence the voter turnout or the voter's decision. What do you think: can political survey results have such influence?" If Yes: "What could be the influence of the survey results? Please note down" And: "Do you think the influence of survey results is rather positive or negative?"



INFLUENCE OF PUBLISHED POLLS ON VOTERS' DECISION

Especially during election campaigns, candidates lagging behind in the polls often criticize survey results: Survey results might have an undesirable influence on voters' decisions. The majority of the respondents among the White House correspondents (59 percent) think that political survey results actually have an influence on voter turnout and/or voting decision. Among the journalists of the *Bundespressekonferenz*, 83 percent see such a direct influence of poll results (Figure 2).

More important: Of the White House correspondents who think that poll results do have an influence, 18 percent consider this influence rather negative, 23 percent consider this influence positive, and 59 percent consider this

influence neither negative nor positive. The German journalists are more skeptical towards polls than their American colleagues. Almost every other respondent (47 percent) of the German journalists who thought that poll results do have an influence, considered this influence rather negative, 8 percent considered it rather positive, and 45 percent considered this influence neither negative nor positive.

The White House correspondents were asked to specify what kind of influence survey results could have. Most journalists who answered that survey results could have an influence on voter turnout or voting decisions described hypothesized effects, particularly on voter turnout. The Mobilization Effect (higher voter turnout in cases where polls suggest a close race), and the Lethargy and Defeatist Effects (lower voter turnout in cases where polls suggest a clear victory for one side) are well acknowledged among White House correspondents. That survey results "could suppress turnout, or energize one side or the other" (respondent no. 1), "polls can energize or discourage potential voters" (respondent no. 3) seem to be common statements among professional journalists.

Effects of survey results on voting decisions were not mentioned as often as effects on voter turnout. If mentioned, the statements seemed to describe what is called the Bandwagon and Underdog Effects. Respondent No. 8 for example stated that survey results could "encourage supporters of the leading candidate" (Bandwagon) and "also motivate supporters of the candidate who is trailing" (Underdog). Respondent no. 19 stated that "people often want to support a winner and may go with a poll leader rather than a vote on issues".

In addition to the effects on voting decisions and voter turnout, some White House correspondents anticipate positive effects on political campaigns in general. Respondent no. 11 continued his statement, saying "poll results actually increase most people's interest in the campaign". Respondent no. 17 stated that survey results "add a sense of momentum to a candidate or campaign". Respondent no. 4 said that poll results are "a way to go beyond anecdotal findings from interviews and provide qualitative analyses".

In the 2005 survey among members of the *Bundespressekonzferenz*, the German journalists anticipated similar effects of political survey results. In addition to the effects on voter turnout and voting decision perceived by White House correspondents, the German journalists named effects that are typical to the more complex election system in Germany. These effects can be summarized as subcategories of strategic voting, such as the Guillotine effect (respondent no. 46 said that "votes might be given away for nothing due to the five percent regulation"), Facilitating tactics (respondent no. 131: "splitting votes in order to facilitate a certain coalition"), and Preventive tactics (respondent no. 162 "leads to strategic behavior").

BAN ON THE PUBLICATION OF POLL RESULTS

In some countries the publication of political survey results is restricted during the final days before an election. According to Spangenberg (2003, p. 1), 30 of 66 countries studied for his report "The Freedom to Publish Opinion Poll Results" had restrictions on the publication of findings from political polls on or prior to Election Day. For this study, the White House correspondents, as well as the members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* in Germany, were asked whether they would appreciate restrictions on the publication of pre-election survey results.

Of 32 White House correspondents, 30 (94 percent) answered they would not appreciate such regulations, whereas a majority of 65 percent of the German journalists answered that they would appreciate restrictive regulations. Thirty-five percent of the German journalists answered that no kind of ban for the publication of political poll results on or prior to election days was necessary.

These results not only reflect different attitudes of the two groups of journalists toward possible impacts of poll results on voting behavior, they also reflect a difference in the interpretation of validity of opinion poll results. Asked about their attitude toward the validity of poll results, a majority of 65 percent of the journalists in both countries answered that it was not justifiable to say that political polls were not able to measure the actual sentiments of people, thus rating the validity of polls as high. Thirteen percent of the White House correspondents ($N=4$), and 25 percent of the German journalists said that such criticism was justifiable.

The White House correspondents who said that it was justifiable to say that survey institutes could not determine the actual sentiments of people, specified problems with political polls. Respondent no. 1 stated that surveys are not always a good instrument to find out about what people think, because "polls are best on horserace questions, such as which candidate is favored to win and weakest on the nuance of public opinion about complex issues. Human beings, unlike pollsters (and politicians) can hold conflicting or ambiguous views on issues and people; polls do not a good job reflecting this ambiguity".

In order to investigate this ambiguity, another White House correspondent recommended the use of additional instruments: "That's why our news organization also conducts individual interviews, focus groups or other methods of sampling public sentiment beyond relying solely on opinion polls" (respondent no. 6). Two other journalists described practical problems of polling methods that have a direct influence on the validity of opinion polls. One journalist said that respondents in surveys might "not elicit truthful answers" because "voters and/or Americans are conditioned NOT to tell pollsters they would never vote for a black candidate, for instance" (respondent no. 6). Another journalist suggested that a specific group of people might generally

TABLE 4 Perceived manipulation of opinion polls, 2005 and 2006/2007 (in percent of all respondents)

	<i>Germany</i> (<i>N</i> = 325)	<i>USA</i> (<i>N</i> = 32)
Happens often	17%	16%
Happens exceptionally	62%	42%
Doesn't happen	10%	26%
Don't know	12%	16%

Question Wording: "Some people maintain that survey organizations might manipulate survey results; for example to benefit the commissioner of the survey. What do you think about the manipulation of political survey results by the survey institutes?"

refuse to answer survey questions that would then have an impact on the survey results (respondent no. 27).

White House correspondents who believe that surveys are able to accurately measure the sentiments of the public often acknowledge the capability of surveys to describe the "broad contours of public opinion and the way it shifts over time" (respondent no. 12) but also say that surveys are not a precise instrument. Typical statements indicated that surveys were "inarguably valuable as means of understanding the general sense of the population" but were only "one measure" (respondent no. 7). Polls are perceived as "not exact predictors" (respondent no. 11) and a method that is not perfect, "or able to capture small nuances" (respondent no. 12). Other journalists said that surveys could generally measure the sentiments of people if they are "carefully worded and thorough" (respondent no. 14) and if adequate questions are asked ("It depends on the question." Respondents no. 26 and no. 29).

Polls have also been criticized as unreliable because of the belief that survey institutes manipulate survey results. A significant number of White House correspondents (42 percent) said that survey institutes sometimes manipulate political poll results, but only in exceptional circumstances. Sixteen percent of the American respondents said that survey institutes often manipulate their findings. However, 26 percent of the White House correspondents said that manipulation would not occur, while 16 percent had no opinion (Table 4).

The German journalists show less confidence in the survey institutes. Seventeen percent of the German journalists think that institutes often manipulate their survey results, and 62 percent think that this would happen at least once in a while, leaving 12 percent without an opinion and 10 percent saying that survey institutes would not manipulate their poll results.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that White House correspondents on average have a more positive than negative attitude toward opinion polls and that

White House correspondents generally assume great public interest in political survey results. This is not surprising, since Roper concluded in 1980 that journalists had changed their attitude toward scientific polls in the 1970s. Since the first publication of Philip Meyer's work on precision journalism in 1973, accompanied by increased instruction about polling techniques in newsrooms and journalism schools, a generally positive attitude toward scientific polling and the use of poll results in reports about politics seems to have been adopted by American elite journalists, such as the White House correspondents.

But the results of this survey provide much more detailed information. For the first time, we can provide quantitative statements about the opinion of White House correspondents toward opinion polls and how they use poll results in their day-to-day business. The findings of the White House correspondents' survey, compared to results of the 2005 survey among members of the *Bundespressekonferenz* in Germany, show us relevant similarities but also important differences between the attitudes of journalists in the U.S. and Germany.

Both the White House correspondents as well as members of the *Bundespressekonferenz*, have a more confident than skeptical attitude toward scientific polling and the use of poll results in their work. However, the results show that White House correspondents have an even more confident attitude than their German colleagues.

The White House correspondents, as well as the members of the *Bundespressekonferenz*, assume high interest among the public in political polls and poll results. However, the American journalists assume even greater interest than their German colleagues.

The confident attitude of White House correspondents toward opinion polls is supported by the responses to questions that asked journalists, how much they actually used survey results for their reports. In comparison with the findings of the survey among members of the *Bundespressekonferenz*, the results support the conclusion that the White House correspondents have a more confident attitude toward opinion polls than their German colleagues. The American journalists show more trust in the system of opinion polling and have adopted a less critical relationship toward polls and their hypothesized effects on voters.

The White House correspondents have accepted opinion polls as an important instrument to investigate public opinion. But some statements of White House correspondents further suggest that opinion polls are not always the best instrument available. Though they are aware that opinion polls are great for investigating "the broad contours of public opinion" (respondent no. 12), but are not as precise for investigating "nuances of public opinion about complex issues" (respondent no. 1), the attitude of

White House correspondents toward opinion polls is widely positive and confident.

Even though American as well as German journalists generally show more confidence in polls than skepticism, most of them would include the name of the poll institute and the commissioner of a poll in their report. This demonstrates their professional attitude to provide sources in their reports. The White House correspondents as a whole emphasized three criteria they would include in poll reports that were emphasized less by their German counterparts. These criteria were: "time of fieldwork" (difference of 23 percent), question wording (difference of 44 percent), and margin of error (difference of 55 percent). One explanation could be that American journalists enjoyed more education and training over the last decades and were told to include such technical information about a poll.

The members of the White House press corps have different opinions about whether survey results in the media do actually influence voter turnout or voting decisions. A slight majority of almost 60 percent assumes such an influence, of which most say that the influence is neither positive nor negative for the electoral process. That is a major difference compared to the results of the German survey. More than 80 percent of the German journalists think that political poll results influence the voter turnout or the voting decision with almost every other journalist interpreting such influence as rather negative.

These differences help to explain the journalists' opinions about whether the publication of poll results should be regulated during the final days before elections. Whereas more than 90 percent of the American journalists oppose such regulations, 66 percent of the German journalists would appreciate them. The main reasons why White House correspondents oppose any regulation on the publication of opinion poll results is probably the importance given to freedom of the press within the U.S., guaranteed in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and a general dislike of government regulations of the free press. But the results of this survey suggest that there are other reasons as well. Since the American journalists assume great news value in political poll results, often use them in their reports, assume a widely positive attitude toward them, and mostly do not believe that opinion poll results could have a negative influence on voter turnout and voting decision, it makes perfect sense to reject governmental decisions that would prevent the publication of this kind of information.

Since the German journalists have been shown as being generally more skeptical toward opinion polls and the use of poll results in the media, it seems logical that they would appreciate governmental regulation of the publication of opinion poll results at certain times. However, skepticism toward opinion polls seems to be a stable European trend. As Donsbach and Antoine (1990)

determined in 1988 and 1989, a majority of German journalists (56 percent) and an even greater majority of French journalists (74 percent) approved regulations on the publication of opinion polls prior to election days.

Finally, the survey among White House journalists draws a clear and consistent picture of how American elite journalists think about political polls. It will be left to further studies to find out whether the trends that were found in this survey are consistent for the average American journalist as well and if they show any changes over time. It would also be interesting to determine if a somewhat more skeptical attitude toward opinion polls is consistent within countries of the European Union, and if journalists on other continents demonstrate different attitudes about political polls and the use of their results in their reports.

REFERENCES

- Andersen, R. (2000). Reporting public opinion polls: The media and the 1997 Canadian election. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 12, 285–298.
- Augstein, R. (1974). Demoskopie und Politik. [Opinion polling and politics]. In E. Noelle-Neumann & E. P. Neumann (Eds.), *Jahrbuch der Öffentlichen Meinung 1968–1973* [*Yearbook on Public Opinion 1968–1973*] (pp. XV–XXII). Allensbach u.a.: Institut für Demoskopie.
- Brettschneider, F. (1997). The press and the polls in Germany, 1980–1994. Poll coverage as an essential part of election campaign reporting. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 9, 248–265.
- Brettschneider, F. (2003). Wahlumfragen: Medienberichterstattung und wirkungen [Election Polls: Media coverage and effects]. In A. Wüst (Ed.), *Politbarometer. Festschrift für Dieter Roth* (pp. 257–282). Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Brettschneider, F. (2008). The news media's use of opinion polls. In W. Donsbach & M. W. Traugott (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 479–486). London: Sage.
- Campbell, D., & Cochran, W. (2003). *Inside the Beltway: A guide to Washington reporting*. Iowa: Iowa State Press.
- Donsbach, W. (1986, November). Der Einfluß von Meinungsumfragen auf die öffentliche Meinung – politische Wirkungsvermutungen und empirische Erkenntnisse [The Impact of opinion polling on public opinion – Assumptions on the political impact and empirical findings]. Paper presented at the ESOMAR/WAPOR-Seminar “Opinion Polls” in Straßburg.
- Donsbach, W., & Antoine, J. (1990). Journalists and the polls: A parallel survey among journalists in France and Germany. *Marketing and Research Today*, 18, 167–174.
- Donsbach, W., & Klett, B. (1993). Subjective objectivity. How journalists in four countries define a key term of their profession. *International Communication Gazette*, 51, 53–83.
- Donsbach, W., & Patterson, T. E. (1996). News decisions: journalists as partisan actors. *Political Communication*, 13, 455–468.

- Frankovic, K. A. (1998). Public opinion and polling. In D. Graber, D. McQuail, & P. Norris (Eds.), *The politics of news. The news of politics* (pp. 150-170). Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Hardmeier, S. (1999). Political poll reporting in Swiss print media. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 11, 257-274.
- Hardmeier, S. (2008). The effects of published polls on citizens. In W. Donsbach, & M. W. Traugott (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 504-513). London et al.: Sage.
- Hess, S. (1992). All the President's reporters: A new survey of the white house press corps. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 22, 311-321.
- Köcher, R. (1986). Bloodhounds or missionaries: Role definitions of German and British journalists. *European Journal of Communication*, 1, 43-64.
- Kumar, M. J. & Sullivan, T. (2003). *The white house world: Transitions, organization, and office operations*. College Station, TX: A&M University Press.
- Ladd, E. C. (1980). Polling and the press: The clash of institutional imperatives. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 44, 574-584.
- Lavrakas, P. J., & Traugott, M. W. (1995). News media's use of Presidential polling in the 1990s: An introduction and overview. In P. J. Lavrakas, M. W. Traugott, & P. V. Miller (Eds.), *Presidential polls and the news media* (pp. 3-19). Boulder, San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press.
- Meyer, E. (1940). A newspaper publisher looks at the polls. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 4, 238-240.
- Meyer, P. (1973). *Precision journalism: A reporter's introduction to social science methods*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press.
- Meyer, P., & Jurgensen, K. (1991). Beating disclosure to death: A rejoinder to Rollberg, Sanders and Buffalo. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 12, 2-7.
- Miller, M. M., & Hurd, R. (1982). Conformity to AAPOR standards in newspaper reporting of public opinion polls. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46, 243-249.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1980). "Wahlprognosen" auch im Wahljahr 1980. *Interview und Analyse*, 7, 4.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1989). Die befragte Nation. Möglichkeiten, Wirkungen und Gefahren der Demoskopie (*The questioned Nation. Opportunities, Impacts and Risks of Opinion Polling*). *Handbuch zur Deutschen Nation. Moderne Wissenschaft und Zukunftsperspektive (Handbook on the German Nation. Modern Science and Future Perspectives)*, 3, 254.
- Paletz, D. L., Short, J. Y., Baker, H., Cookman Campell, B., Cooper, R. J., & Oeslander, R. M. (1980). Polling in the media: Content, credibility, and consequences. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 44, 495-513.
- Röhme, N. (1997). *The freedom to publish opinion polls. Report on a worldwide study*. Amsterdam, Chapel Hill: ESOMAR/WAPOR.
- Rollberg, J. N., Sanders, L. W., & Buffalo, M. D. (1990). Down to the wire: How six newspapers reported public opinion polls during the 1988 Presidential campaign. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 11, 80-93.
- Roper, B. W. (1980). The media and the polls: A boxscore. *Public Opinion*, 3, 46-49.
- Smith, T. J., III & Verrall, D. O. (1985). A critical analysis of Australian television coverage of election opinion polls. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 49, 58-79.

- Spangenberg, F. (2003). *The freedom to publish opinion poll results: Report on a world-wide update*. Foundation for Information, WAPOR/ESOMAR.
- Suhonen, P. (2001). Opinion polls and journalism: The case of Finland. In S. Splichal (Ed.), *Public opinion and democracy. Vox populi – vox dei* (pp. 311–335). Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Weaver, D. H., & Sung, T. K. (2002). Quality in public opinion poll reports: Issue salience, knowledge and conformity to AAPOR/WAPOR standards. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 14, 202–212.
- Weaver, D. H. et al. (2007). *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. news people at the dawn of a new millennium*. Mahwah, NJ, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Weaver, D. H. (2008). Attitudes of journalists toward public opinion research. In W. Donsbach & M. W. Traugott (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 451–458). London et al.: Sage.
- Weimann, G. (1990). The obsession to forecast: Pre-election polls in the Israeli press. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54, 396–408.
- Worcester, R. M. (1991). *British public opinion. A guide to the history and methodology of political opinion polling*. Oxford: Cambridge.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Wolfgang Wichmann has earned two degrees (Master of Arts) in Media and Communication at the University of Augsburg, Germany, as well as in Journalism at the School of Journalism at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. Since 2008 Mr. Wichmann works on his dissertation project as a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hohenheim, Germany. Despite his academic career, he has been working as a broadcast, print and online journalist for several German media companies since 1999.

Frank Brettschneider is Professor for Communication Studies and Communication Theory at the University of Hohenheim. His research focuses on campaign communication, public opinion, media effects, and communication performance management. He is member of the advisory board of the international institute for media analysis “Media Tenor” and director of the Centre for Communication Performance Management (<http://www.uni-hohenheim.de/komm/>).

Address correspondence to Wolfgang Wichmann, University of Hohenheim, Kurfuerstenstr. 52, 87600 Kaufbeuren, Germany, E-mail: wowichmann@web.de