

The Gallup Legacy at 120 Years

George Horace Gallup was born in November 1901 in Jefferson, Iowa and is a 10th generation native American. He earned his bachelor's degree at Iowa in 1923, his master's there in 1925 and his doctorate in 1928.

George Gallup started polling newspaper audiences in the early 1920s, while he was still an undergraduate at the University of Iowa. His professional life, distinguished by its remarkable diversity and productivity, was destined to span six decades. 'The last time - recalls historian and journalist Barry Sussman – I talked to Gallup, was by telephone, more than a year before he died. Making small talk, I asked why he was in his office on such a nice day. He was, after all, more than eighty years old at the time. "We are making plans for polling in the year 2000", he replied.'

Gallup, alas, did not live to see these plans come into being...

It was in 1935, after Dr. Gallup had been hired to do research for the New York advertising agency Young & Rubicam, that he founded the Gallup Poll, with its headquarters in Princeton and an editorial office in New York.

The polling organization was officially, and rather grandly, christened the American Institute of Public Opinion. Its stated mission was to measure the public's attitudes on social, political and economic issues, and it was soon sending out weekly reports of its polling results, initially to 40 daily newspapers.

The poll's success in predicting the 1936 election, though it underrated Roosevelt's popular vote, was underscored by the fact that a straw vote carried out by The Literary Digest, an influential magazine of the day, had wrongly indicated that Mr. Landon would win.

Beginning in 1937, public opinion polling organizations affiliated with the Gallup Poll were set up in Britain and dozens of other foreign countries; and in Princeton, which became the capital of the polling industry after Dr. Gallup moved there, it was respectfully argued that in some European languages the verb "to poll" became "to do a Gallup."

After teaching journalism at Iowa, Drake and Northwestern universities, Dr. Gallup became director of research at Young & Rubicam in 1932. He continued to work for that firm until 1947, testing the efficacy of advertisements, the appeal of products and the impact of radio broadcasts.

Just after the war Dr. Gallup organized a meeting of 13 institutes worldwide in Loxwood Hall in Sussex, UK (from 10 May to 18 May 1947), where the International Association of Public Opinion Institutes (IAPOA), famous as Gallup International Association /registered in Zurich/ was created and still is not only the oldest but as well the most reputable professional body of pollsters in the World.

It was not until 1958 that the Gallup Organization Inc./registered in the US/ was formed. Its original mission was to conduct marketing research, but its activities were subsequently broadened.

Under the influence of Lord James Bryce, Gallup was imbued with profound respect for the Swiss model of democracy; he even fell in love with that country. He bought a house in the small Tschingel village in the vicinity of the Lake of Thun, not far away from Bern and, having retired from full-time work, lived there for many years. On 26 July 1984, George Gallup died of a heart attack in his Swiss home; he was buried in the cemetery at Princeton.

On the tombstone shared by Gallup and his wife the ancient motto of the Gallup family was chiseled: “Be bold. Be wise.”

Making a full and fair assessment of George Gallup’s creative heritage is not an easy task.

- To comprehend the range and variety of his work, one must appreciate, above all, the multitude of domains over which Gallup’s endeavors were spread. He himself saw public opinion research and the propagation of new attitudes towards polling in general as the major task of his life. But at the same time, Gallup was a journalist and a psychologist, a researcher of mass media and cinema audiences, a pioneer in advertising research, a statistician, an author of countless research papers, a university professor, a book writer, and a businessman.
- The development of the methodology and practice of opinion research and the formation of generations of pollsters worldwide, as well as of the network of their professional associations, will probably continue to be remembered well into the future as Gallup’s major and lasting contribution to science and culture.
- Compliance with rigorous scientific standards was the primary determinant of his approach to public opinion surveys. Gallup wrote: ‘If our work is not scientific, then no one in the field of social science, and few of those in the natural sciences, have a right to use the word.’ It was in great measure owing to his efforts that by the 1950s, scientific soundness and ethical standards were becoming the universal norm in sample surveys.
- Of paramount importance for Gallup throughout his life and work was the allegiance to what he called an open door policy: ‘Since the day it was organized, the American Institute of Public Opinion had maintained a policy of providing full information about all of its procedures and operations... Unlike some other occupations, the polling profession has no trade secrets. We have held that the public has every right to know just how we function.’
- Gallup’s motivation as a citizen and researcher was nurtured by the pursuit of liberty and democracy – the values which inspired the first pilgrims to leave England for the New World. He believed in direct democracy and considered it an effective form of public participation in state affairs.
- Gallup was also well aware that democratic procedures and institutions are useless without an educated citizenry - conscious of its rights, ready and capable to defend them. Reminiscing about his school and university years, the 82-year Gallup commented: ‘Dealing with problems of education has been the most interesting work I’ve done. Democracies are effective only when the people are well-informed; almost every country in South America has taken the US Constitution word for word, but many have failed, because their people are not informed.’

The legacy bequeathed by Gallup has ensured him an indelible place in the history of science, culture, and politics. Decades and centuries will pass, but the scientific study of public opinion and of the dynamics of human attitudes will continue to find important reference points in the work and the writings of George Gallup.