

HOODWINKING THE PUBLIC

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The pollsters were mostly wrong again on Election Day—in some cases by a huge margin—thus making a mockery of psephology, the statistical study of elections. It doesn't have to be this way: statistical models are not the problem; the problem is poor sampling. Unfortunately, much of the survey research done these days is not much better, often allowing the political bent of those conducting it to color the outcomes.

One of the most glaringly hyper-political surveys ever done was released in November by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in partnership with the Brookings Institution. "Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?" is the title of this year's American Values Survey.

PRRI has a partisan record, so it is not surprising that it would conduct a flawed survey, though this one is by far its worst undertaking. On the other hand, the Brookings Institution has a good reputation, making this co-venture regrettable.

To be sure, there is much about this survey that is quite good, and helpful to sociologists like myself. But there are several aspects to it that are so indefensible as to discredit it.

The report was written in part by the CEO of PRRI, Robert P. Jones. He is not a sociologist; his Ph.D. is in religion. He is most well known for promoting the idea that white Christian men pose an existential threat to American democracy, feeding the left-wing trope that white supremacists are one of the nation's most pressing problems.

It is not until the latter part of the report that there is a

segment on this subject—Trump supporters are singled out for rebuke—but it is front- and-center in the marketing of the survey. Indeed, the first subject in the press release is titled, “Anti-Democratic Beliefs and Support for Political Violence on the Right.”

We just came off a year when left-wing violence almost destroyed Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis and other cities. The spike in crime that affected most big cities is at least partly the result of left-wing mayors and district attorneys taking a hands-off approach to crime, ordering cops to stand down. Meanwhile Antifa and Black Lives Matter killed dozens of innocent people, and trashed so many stores in cities like New York that it turned them into a ghost town for much of the year.

The report, however, has nothing to say about these events. It is only concerned about right-wing violence, which was miniscule compared to the degree of violence carried out by the left.

Survey researchers, like social scientists in general, are firmly situated on the left-wing side of the political spectrum. Many of the honest ones among them often suffer from ideological blinders: they are so used to thinking that their political leanings are an expression of reality (as opposed to a reflection of their bias), that they don't realize how tendentious their work is.

Take, for example, the report's treatment of the survey questions on abortion. Having read literally scores of surveys on this issue for several decades, it is clear that the only ones that are truly helpful are the ones that dig deep, offering respondents many different ways they can explain their position. In short, the more simplistic and brief the questions, the less enlightening they are.

This survey hones in on one question: Was *Roe v. Wade*, the

decision that legalized abortion, the right one? It found that 63% agree. What it didn't ask is more important.

Most Americans are conflicted on this subject. They do not want to make all abortions illegal, yet they do not like the current condition whereby all abortions are legal, regardless of the reasons for it, and at any time of gestation. They want restrictions. Most do not endorse abortions that are procured for matters of inconvenience, and the further along a woman is in her pregnancy, the less likely they are to support it.

This survey never gets to this level of discernment, and is therefore of limited utility.

Has God granted America a special role in human history? In 2013, 64% said yes, but today the figure has dropped to 44%. That is surely worth exploring. The report simply offers the findings, without drawing any conclusions. Fine. But the press release tells a different story. It says that those who answered affirmatively evince "Christian nationalist sympathies," citing Republicans as an example (68% of whom agree with the statement).

This is cruel and dishonest. Simply because someone believes that God granted our nation a special role in history does not make him a Christian nationalist, a term employed by Jones as roughly analogous to white supremacists. He's wrong. In fact, his own survey undercuts his narrative. What was not said in the press release, but is said in the report, is that 67% of black Protestants agree with the statement. Are they also white supremacists?

It says a lot about the bias that these authors harbor that they don't say a word about the black response in their press release. To do so would make mince meat of their argument that Republicans, most of whom are white, are the most likely to be Christian nationalists.

Perception does not always jive with reality, even if it

functions as such. In objective terms, there is less discrimination against African Americans today than at any time in American history. Gains in education and employment are stunning, approval of interracial marriage has never been higher, and a record number of blacks hold public office. Obama and Oprah are unusual, but their climb to the top is indicative that things have changed dramatically.

This has to be said because the report finds that only 42% of Americans agree that "We have made great progress in achieving true racial equality in the U.S." Why, given all the objective measures of racial progress, is the figure so low?

It is not hard to figure out. Over the past few years, the nation has been embroiled in one racial controversy after another, many of them dealing with police interactions with blacks. That the media have exploited these incidents—and in some cases seriously misrepresented what actually happened—cannot be denied, the effect of which is to feed the perception that the cause of racial equality is going backwards. This is irresponsible and dangerous.

One of the main factors accounting for the perception that racial discrimination is getting worse is the prevalence of critical race theory. The report's coverage of this issue smacks of politics.

The report offers data on what Americans think about this subject, which is helpful, but then it says, "Despite some high-profile flare-ups over this issue in the media," most Americans believe that students should be taught about the nation's "best achievements and worst mistakes."

This is a lousy segue. The latter has nothing to do with the former. Critical race theory teaches students that there are oppressors, namely white people, and the oppressed, namely black people. It makes judgments about people based on their skin pigmentation, not their individual attributes. In short,

it is a racist ideology, designed to drive a wedge between whites and blacks.

The report's section on the issue of race only gets more inaccurate when the subject of police reaction to black crime is discussed. It found that Democrats are significantly less likely to say that police killings of black men are isolated incidents than are Republicans, most of whom "trust far-right media outlets (91%) and Fox News (88%)." In other words, the more objective-minded Democrats, who no doubt watch such "politically neutral" stations as CNN, MSNBC and PBS (more about this shortly), are assumed by the report's authors to be right in concluding that police killings of blacks "are part of a broader pattern of how police treat Black Americans."

This perspective, however, does not square with reality.

Michael Tonry, a researcher whom no one would consider a conservative, came to a surprising conclusion in his book, *Malign Neglect*. "Racial differences in patterns of offending, not racial bias by police and other officials, are the principal reason that such greater proportions of blacks than whites are arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned."

Robert Sampson and Janet Lauritsen, who have sterling liberal credentials, found that "large racial differences in criminal offending," not racism, explains why more blacks are in prison proportionately than whites for longer terms.

In 2016, Harvard professor Roland G. Fryer Jr. led a team of researchers to study this issue. They examined more than 1,000 police shootings in 10 major police departments in three states. "On the most extreme use of force—officer-involved shootings—we find no racial differences in either the raw data or when contextual factors are taken into account." The black economist admitted, "It is the most surprising result of my career."

In 2019, social scientists from Michigan State University and

Arizona State University reported on the results of their two-year study. "When adjusting for crime, we find no systemic evidence of anti-Black disparities in fatal shootings of unarmed citizens, or fatal shootings involving misidentification of harmless objects."

In other words, the Republicans came to the right conclusion, and the Democrats were wrong in their assessment of this issue. Could it be that Fox News and the "far-right" media outlets did a better job covering this matter than their competitors did?

Many other examples could be given, but what genuinely reveals the left-wing bent to this report is the way it treats media sources. Throughout the report it scores respondents who get their news from "Fox News" (cited 28 times) or "far-right" media outlets (asked 31 times). It never defines the latter. Nor does it ask about "left-wing" news sources.

The term "far-right" suggests fascist or Nazi-leaning. In the press release, we learn that the authors of this research believe that Newsmax and One America News are "far-right" sources! On p. 25 of the report, in footnote #10, it defines CNN, MSNBC and public television as examples of "mainstream news." Only someone living in a left-wing bubble thinks this way.

If CNN, MSNBC and PBS were labeled "far-left" in a survey, it would be written off as a right-wing study. It must also be said that, in keeping with the game plan, "mainstream" CNN hosted a show on the report, inviting its authors, including Jones, to appear, and the New York Times ran a story on one part of the report. That was the icing on the cake.

The funding for this dishonest research was largely made by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with help from the Wilbur and Hilda Glenn Family Foundation and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock. The Glenn

Foundation appears not to be hyper-politicized, but the same is not true of the other two.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York makes grants to the Center for American Progress, Faith in Public Life, and the ACLU. All have an anti-Catholic record and receive money from George Soros. The Veatch Program gives to PRRI, Faith in Public Life, and Black Lives Matter.

In other words, left-wing foundations fund a report by a left-wing research company and the left-wing media give them a media splash. The public has been hoodwinked.