

The demise of the Voter News Service following snafus in both the 2000 and 2002 elections and its subsequent reconstitution represent the latest on-the-ground casualty and stop-gap response in what many say is an ongoing crisis in election polling.

Criticisms of election polling are not new. They join a growing trend. Do persistent challenges to election polling pose a threat to its survival as an industry? Will election polling wither away?

The answer is no, and the reason is that too many people have too much of a stake in it to allow that to happen. Polling has ballooned into a central feature of American elections because of the motivations and needs of three key sets of actors who sponsor and consume polls—the media, politicians, and voters. The mutually reinforcing incentives of these groups create a “triple alliance of polling” that stands firm against all challengers to the election polling industry.

The media commit millions of dollars to polls so that journalists and editors can use them to attract audiences. Getting out the freshest numbers on the campaign horse race is a quick way to sell papers, draw listeners and watchers, and bring in advertising dollars.

The press also uses polls to ration and frame its coverage of the politicians running for office. Results allow journalists to characterize one candidate credibly as the “frontrunner” and another as “struggling.”

Armed with poll findings as evidence, media executives and editors can limit who participates in the debates they sponsor. They can focus their coverage on a few candidates or parties when campaigns are crowded. Even as the press criticizes polling, it depends on it to run its core business activities.

Politicians pin many of their hopes for winning on media polls, which they slavishly track, as well as on polling of their own. Polls equip politicians with the strategic intelligence to tailor statements and actions closely to the few issues that stand out in the minds of voters and to craft messages that resonate with their emotions and policy preferences.

When media polls show their candidates in the lead, campaigns seize on them as an opportunity to project confidence and laud their message, while dismissing numbers that show their candidates lagging.

Indeed, the intensity and wide scope of criticism of polling in recent elections can be traced to close contests in which criticism of unfavorable polling numbers became a standard campaign tool for damage control. The result is that polling now faces unrelenting attacks: every horse race poll in a tightly contested election can be counted on to spark harsh and sustained denunciations from the lagging candidate, which the press then covers as part of the campaign.

Most criticisms, then, do not emanate from serious technical flaws in polling, but rather reflect a closely divided electorate and a campaign strategy to shoot the messenger.

Voters, for their part, rail against pollsters as busybodies but find horse race polling useful nonetheless. Overtaxed as they balance work with private lives, they welcome opportunities to cut corners in making choices among candidates.

Horse race polls can play into voters' decisions about whether to contribute money or time, and to whom (frontrunners in polls during the primaries find it easier to raise money); whether to turn out to vote (one reason frontrunners downplay polls just before election day); and even who to vote for in crowded races (third party candidates in tight races between Democratic and Republican candidates plead with voters not to consider a vote for them as "wasted").

The mutual dependence of media, politicians, and voters on election polling creates durable motivations for its continuation. Curtailing polling would impose costs on each that none would welcome.

Even so, polling faces two challenges that will keep it in the hot seat. First, like journalists in troubled parts of the world who now find themselves treated as combatants, media polls are attacked by partisans who question their veracity, and the journalists treat these charges as a legitimate and, indeed, standard partisan practice.

At times, partisans have valid concerns, as when media outlets succumb to competitive pressures to rush out one-day polls or cut costs by using "hard" likely voter screens. But mostly the criticisms are vague and transparent strategic ploys at damage control.

Second, Americans distrust polls. The drumbeat of partisan damage control specialists wears down even the most astute observers of politics. As important, though, is the use of polls by politicians to pinpoint the words and arguments that will create the false appearance of responsiveness to voters. In the eyes of many Americans, polls are the tools of manipulators and false knights who mouth the sentiments of voters with little intention of following through.

Election polling looks like it is here to stay for quite some time, but whether it remains a reputable endeavor is very much up in the air.