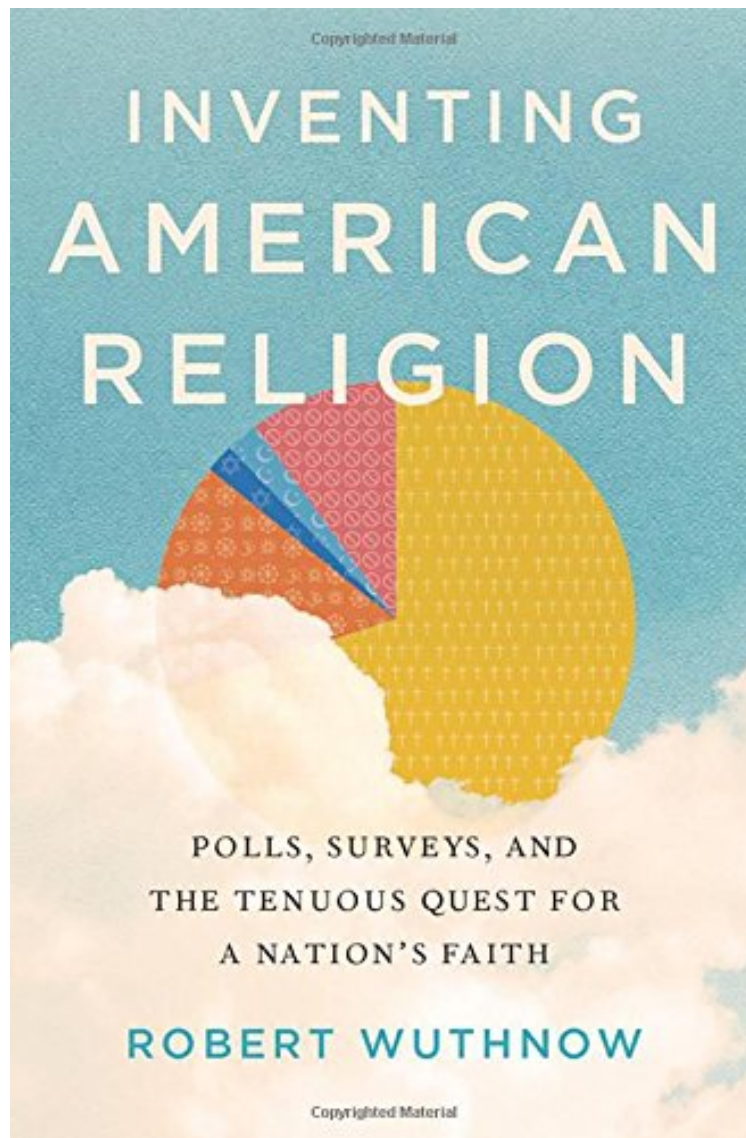


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Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith

Robert Wuthnow

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Robert Wuthnow : Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith
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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Measuring America's religion one poll at a time By Ron Bohr A first class analysis by an outstanding sociologist of American religion. He shows how the polling industry created some of the ways in which we conceptualize the role of politicized religion. This industry is partly responsible for a distorted view of conservative "born again" religiosity. This study explains why survey research is becoming increasingly difficult to conduct accurately. 6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Wuthnow explains how polls are done and why the consumer should be cautious. By Spencer In the newly released book, *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith*, Robert Wuthnow outlines the rise of scientific polling, the increasing influence of the religious questions in them, and the more recent decline in support for the published poll results. SUMMARY Wuthnow's thesis is that the polling industry has influenced and at times distorted how religion is understood and portrayed, particularly in the media but also to some extent by religious leaders, practitioners, and scholars. He argues this thesis in eight chapters. The introduction outlines the early history of public polling and surveys the breadth of the history that Wuthnow goes on to unpack and interpret in the remaining seven chapters. Chapter Two covers the early attempts to do comprehensive surveys to assess public opinion. Such surveys were accurate for local issues, but they were time consuming, expensive, and unable to establish broader public opinion. Still, they were a common tool used by social organizers like Du Bois. In the third chapter, Wuthnow outlines the rise of George Gallup, who pioneered the use of the scientific poll to assay public opinion on a broader scale; since Gallup was a self-professed Christian, he asked religious questions in his polls, which began the process of examining the impact of religion on social and political positions. Chapter Four highlights the differences between scientific studies, which are usually carried out by scholars, and public opinion polls. Wuthnow explains that polls are designed as quick hit diagnostics, based on an attempt to gain a rough idea of a person's opinion with as few questions as possible. In contrast, scientific studies ask more probing questions. As a result, scientific studies tend to be more narrowly focused, but they also tend to have more precise explanations for the results. Scientific studies go after the why not merely the what. In the fifth chapter, the evolution of the pollster as pundit is discussed. In 1976, the so-called year of the evangelical, the religion question became more important. Suddenly Gallups years of asking about religion began to pay off. Additionally, the people doing the polls began to interpret them for the media audiences. Its easy to see how possible misinterpretations can result. This trend to question the polls has grown since that point; for some, the promise of punditry undermines the possibility of objectivity in the polls. In the sixth chapter, Wuthnow describes the falling confidence in polls. This was due to the conflation of pundits and pollsters. It also has to do with the changing demographic of respondents. Initially people would answer the phone and respond to polls, but that began to change. Response rate became an issue and the questions about the demographics of those actually responding to polls arose. Additionally, external observers (though not the pollsters themselves) began to question some of the ways conclusions were drawn. These observers began to notice fluctuations in some of the responses, such that the percentage of churchgoers varied widely across a six-month span in some cases. Chapter Seven discusses the breaking down of the fourth wall, when pollsters began to take polls about polls. The answers began to show a growing distrust in the accuracy and usefulness of polling. However, Wuthnow argues that the influence of polling is far from gone. He notes, Polling studies demonstrate that polling rarely has discernible effects on election outcomes, but it offers background information that draws attention to how candidates are doing and reinforces implicit perceptions that some issues are more important than others. Wuthnow concludes the book by surveying the state of polling in Chapter Eight. Polls are still important, but they arent the trusted sources of information they once were. They are now more likely to be used as sermon illustrations or points for beginning a more in depth process of investigation. Polls continue to suffer due to lowering response rates. People's lives have become saturated with polls, opinion questions, and other calls for feedback. In a world of big data, politicians and corporations are turning away from using polls as ultimate grounds for decisions; better information is available in usage statistics from Facebook, Twitter, and other sources. Additionally, the history of polls continues to show that the categories being used to define religion are no longer adequate (if they ever were). The future of polling, particularly related to religion, is indeterminate. It is unlikely that polls will disappear, but criticisms of polls may continue to reduce their importance. Time will tell. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION Wuthnow's book is timely. Polls are regularly published; their results are lauded as sure truths by the 24-hour media cycle by pollsters and the talking heads. Real people, on the other hand, are asking more and more whether the results are trustworthy. After all, we think, when is the last time I was asked to respond to a poll? Most of us dont even answer the phone when we dont know the number. Our experience drives us to question the validity of polls, whether that is just or not. *Inventing American Religion* is part history and part critique. His history shows what has happened and, it seems to me, explains it very clearly. His critique is a telling warning about how polls have been abused and how to avoid being misled by them. At least it provides grounds for asking further questions, something that is nearly always a worthwhile endeavor. The weakness of this volume is that it highlights a problem--the potential unreliability of polls--but it fails to provide a solution. This, of course, was not part of his thesis. However, if Wuthnow had any suggestions about how to improve the use of polls or interpret them better, it would have been good to include them. In the balance, this is an important book for academics and pastors who want to use polls in their papers, books, and sermons. Wuthnow's point is well made: polls may not be trustworthy and misreading the data may

well lead the consumer astray. Note: This is an edited version of a review previously published at www.EthicsAndCulture.com. OUP provided a gratis copy of this book with no expectation of a positive review

Today, a billion-dollar-a-year polling industry floods the media with information. Pollsters tell us not only which political candidates will win, but how we are practicing our faith. How many Americans went to church last week? Have they been born again? Is Jesus as popular as Harry Potter? Polls tell us that 40 percent of Americans attend religious services each week. They show that African Americans are no more religious than white Americans, and that Jews are abandoning their religion in record numbers. According to leading sociologist Robert Wuthnow, none of that is correct. Pollsters say that attendance at religious services has been constant for decades. But during that time response rates in polls have plummeted, robotic "push poll" calls have proliferated, and sampling has become more difficult. The accuracy of political polling can be known because elections actually happen. But there are no election results to show if the proportion of people who say they pray every day or attend services every week is correct. A large majority of the public doubts that polls can be trusted, and yet night after night on TV, polls experts sum up the nation's habits to an eager audience of millions. *Inventing American Religion* offers a provocative new argument about the influence of polls in contemporary American society. Wuthnow contends that polls and surveys have shaped-and distorted-how religion is understood and portrayed in the media and also by religious leaders, practitioners, and scholars. He calls for a robust public discussion about American religion that extends well beyond the information provided by polls and surveys, and suggests practical steps to facilitate such a discussion, including changes in how the results of polls and surveys are presented.

"Based on survey research, Robert Wuthnow has written some of the most widely read books about American religion. Here he turns a critical eye on surveys and polls. As only Wuthnow can, he shows that numbers cannot speak for themselves, that Americans have gone too far in letting surveys and polls define our faith experiences for us. Anyone who cares about how we count the past or future of American religion should read this book." --Elaine Howard Ecklund, Herbert S. Autrey Chair Professor of Sociology, Rice University "Wuthnow's *Inventing American Religion* offers a remarkable portrait not just of the history of religious polls and surveys in the United States, but also how these methods of research have shaped - if not sometimes distorted - the development of religious categories. The book is packed full of insights about the role of polls and surveys in studying religion, at times attempting to capture new trends, and other times labeling those trends and offering new maps for portraying this ever-changing territory. A must read for scholars and journalists alike interested in American religion." --Wade Clark Roof, J.F. Rowley Professor of Religion and Society Emeritus and Research Professor "Inventing American Religion is an important contribution to our expanding map of twentieth-century American culture and religious life, framing a way to understand how public understandings of 'American religion' were shaped and continue to be influenced by the rise of surveys and public polling. Wuthnow brings both a sociological insider's first-hand knowledge of the promises and problems of polling and survey techniques, and an historian's interest in the complexity of American religious life to this lively study. The result is a rich, rewarding, and thought-provoking book about the complex role that polling and surveys continue to play in shaping Americans' public understandings of what it means to be religious." --Courtney Bender, Professor of Religion, Columbia University "Written at a level for advanced undergraduates and early-career graduate students, the book has worked well in my courses on contemporary American religion and social scientific methods. That Wuthnow sometimes understates his harshest criticisms means that readers and instructors must amplify his soft-spoken advice, but these qualities also make the book rich for close reading and discussion." --American Academy of Religion "In this clear, timely book, Wuthnow explores a subject both ubiquitous and curiously elusive to critical engagement. Wuthnow narrates the history of religion polling to raise questions about how Americans self-understanding is constructed and managed. The narrative is staged via numerous well chosen historical episodes, each illustrating Wuthnow's concern about the lack of critical interrogation of and insufficient nuance within polls." --Religious Studies About the Author Robert Wuthnow is the Gerhard R. Andlinger '52 Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. He is the author of numerous books on American culture and religion.