Politics expert finds presidents typically only use polls to back decisions they've already made

By Topher Sanders
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ITHACA — A polling expert who has looked at years of data collected by past American presidents said Tuesday that the leaders often used polls to support decisions they've already made, rather than use them to decide what to do next.

“They come into office knowing where they're going to go, and then they bring in the pollsters that are working for the White House to figure out how to publicly present their policy decisions they've already made,” Lawrence Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota, said Tuesday in a lecture at Cornell University's Olin Library.

“So this is taking the pandering idea of polls and public opinion driving policy, and reversing it and showing that it's the policy decisions that drive the kinds of public opinion research that is done,” he said.

Jacobs used data obtained from the presidential archives of presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

The researcher used Freedom of Information requests to obtain the data.

Jacobs said survey research was developed as a tool of democracy, but the ways presidential administrations have used polls are at odds with the instrument's original intent.

Jacobs said Kennedy had a special affinity for polling.

“Kennedy was remarkably drawn to public opinion polling, and I would credit him with being most responsible for bringing polling fully into the White House,” Jacobs said.

The number of polls conducted by administrations increased from Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon but dropped with Reagan, Jacobs said. But, Jacobs said, Reagan asked many more questions in his polls than did his predecessors.

“There’s a much higher level of strategic and intellectual attention to what is going on in those polls,” he said. “So the fact that Ronald Reagan is doing fewer polls is not nearly as revealing as the number of questions that are now being asked. Lyndon Johnson would go out on these fishing expeditions with very broad, open-ended questions and get a whole lot of results and they would kind of scratch their heads.

“There’s a fewer number of discrete results (with Reagan's polls),” he said, “but there is a lot more intellectual work going into the construct of the instrument.”

Jacobs is just beginning to explore the polling data of George H.W. Bush's administration.

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