



Mervin Field

March 11, 1921 – June 8, 2015

Mervin Field died in Marin County on Monday, June 8 at age 94. Founder and namesake of the *Field Poll*, Field defined California politics and was an influential voice on the national political scene for more than sixty-five years. He was the man who explained California to Californians and to the nation and generations of journalists across the nation relied on him for the authority of his data and the insight of his analysis.

Field secured a reputation for candor shortly after launching his poll in 1947. In the weeks before the 1948 presidential election there was a widespread belief, based on the forecasts of virtually every political observer from both parties and every national and state poll, that Dewey was on his way to a comfortable victory over Truman.

However, a late pre-election poll by Field showed an astounding result: Dewey and Truman were tied in California. Convinced an error had occurred in data gathering or tabulation, Field combed his data and found a few responses he believed to be questionable and corrected them. The result altered the tie in Field's original data and put Dewey ahead by five points. But when the ballots were counted, Truman carried California by one half of one percent.

Rather than hide his manipulations from the media following the election, Field confessed the sin he had committed – second-guessing his data. His frank honesty won over politicians, pundits, and pollsters across the nation and would become a Field hallmark.

Over its long sixty-seven year history, *The Field Poll* has published more than 2,500 reports and has built a national reputation as an independent, non-partisan public opinion news service. While its candidate polls in key contests have attracted the heaviest media attention, more than half of his polling reports dealt with public policy issues that affected the lives of Californians and shaped the actions of their legislature. Field's reputation grew, along with the myth in the national media that if you want to see America tomorrow, look at California today, and Field became the lens through which much of the nation viewed California.

His influence on California politics was firmly established by the 1960s, when an adverse showing in a *Field Poll* could dry up a candidate's fundraising. By the mid-1970s, political reporters around the state were writing stories asserting that Field was one of the most powerful forces in state politics and asking, "Are his polls too influential?"

In 1984, the San Jose Mercury News called Field "the most cited source in the world on what Californians think, love, vote, hate, fear, eat, drink, and smoke." In 1986, a capital columnist wrote, "At this point in the campaign season, Field may be the most powerful figure in the state."

Field rose to this position despite the fact that he had no formal training as a political scientist or statistician. An autodidact, his lack of a college degree bothered him throughout his life but turned him into a dedicated student of the art and science of survey research.

In 1945, two years before he launched *The Field Poll*, he founded Field Research Corporation, a consumer and opinion research firm. Over the years, Field Research grew to be a leading national survey research organization, conducting studies for major corporations, government agencies, foundations, universities, and public and private organizations.

Field conceded that the primary reason for establishing *The Field Poll*, at a time when survey research in business or politics was something of a novelty, was to generate publicity for survey methods. Polling pioneer George Gallup had suggested to him that political poll reports in the media would attract the attention not only of the general public, but of business executives who would be more inclined to hire a successful public polling organization to do consumer research.

Gallup was right. *The Field Poll* fueled the success of Field Research. The prominence acquired by *The Field Poll* was a source of gratification to Field, and he relished his role as a major political player. But he was equally proud of building an internationally recognized consumer and market research company with an enlightened management philosophy, a devoted staff, and an impressive roster of clients.

Launching Field Research with a rented desk in a cramped office, Field faced formidable obstacles with his struggling start-up. For several years he got by on short term loans from individuals and banks. During one particularly rough patch, Field took a job working nights as a service station attendant to pay expenses.

Over time Field assembled an outstanding team of researchers, and when he retired from Field Research in 2000 the company had a staff of over 40 professional and operations people and employed hundreds of part-time interviewers.

The *Poll's* financial support comes from newspapers, television stations, the University of California, the California State University system, and non-profit foundations. To maintain its objectivity and non-partisanship, *The Field Poll* has never worked for or received funds from candidates, political parties or special interests during election campaigns.

In 1995, Field turned over the directorship of *The Field Poll* to his longtime associate Mark DiCamillo. Field continued to provide advice and counsel to *The Field Poll* and Mr. DiCamillo until his death.

In 2010, and again in 2014, Nate Silver's influential fivethirtyeight.com web site ranked *The Field Poll* among the top three U.S. polling organizations in pre-election polling accuracy. Field received numerous awards, including two from the Northern California Chapter of the American Marketing Association. The first, in 1956, was for his "Field Index of Advertising Efficiency", which rated the success of newspaper advertisements in attracting and holding consumer attention. The second, in 1971, was for "Outstanding Service to the Profession of Marketing Research"

In selecting Field as one of 30 men and women who had the greatest influence on California government and politics in the 20th century the California Journal observed: "Over the past half century, Field and his Poll have defined California politics: he has been the man who explained Californians to one another and the nation."

In 2001, Field received the Market Research Council's Hall of Fame award in "recognition of (his) contribution of outstanding and lasting value to the practice of market research." Field held offices in the American Marketing Association and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and in 1979 received its annual AAPOR Award for Exceptionally Distinguished Achievement in public opinion research. He also helped establish the National Council of Published Polls and was a founding director of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations.

In his eighties, Field won the academic recognition that had long eluded him. In 1996, California State University awarded him an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. The University of California, Berkeley, named him a Regents Professor. He served on the Advisory Council of Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, and received its Distinguished Service Award for "advancing the spirit of good government and improving the quality of public affairs of California and the nation."

Since 1956, *The Field Poll* has maintained a relationship with the University of California and California State University campuses where all *Field Poll* survey data are deposited. This extensive body of survey data has become an invaluable resource for scholars, media, and public policy makers. It is a unique and rich archive used in political science, journalism, sociology, and survey research methodology courses.

Mervin Field was born on March 11, 1921 in New Brunswick, N.J., the fifth child of Isidore Field and Yetty Siegel who emigrated from Eastern Europe. Two brothers and two sisters preceded him in death: David (1920), Simon (1959), Sally (1977), and Claire (2005).

Field's mother fell ill following his birth and his parents were unable to care for him. After spending two years in an orphanage, he lived with an aunt and uncle who raised him until he was 15. A sophomore at Princeton High School, he lived on his own, supporting himself as a grocery clerk and gas station and parking lot attendant.

He found his true calling in a chance meeting in 1937 as a junior in high school with polling pioneer George Gallup. Field was intrigued by the mechanics of public opinion sampling and fell in love with polling. At 20, he got his first job in public opinion research as an interviewer with Claude Robinson's Opinion Research Corp.

While working full time after high school, he took night classes at Rutgers University and studied at the University of Missouri. But, unable to support himself, he had to drop out after a few months. In 1942, Field worked for the Gallup Poll and became a cadet at the U. S. Merchant Marine Academy. Field boarded his first ship in 1943, and after lengthy active sea duty rose to a Chief Mate. He went to sea with a duffel bag full of textbooks and reference materials on public opinion research.

Field was an avid tennis and bridge player and an accomplished chess player. He was an aficionado of jazz and stand-up comedy. If he had any regrets in an otherwise rich and full life, it may be that he never fulfilled his oft-expressed wish that he had become a stand-up comedian.

His first marriage to Virginia Fallon in 1949 ended in divorce. His second marriage in 1957 to Marilyn Hammer lasted until her death in 2005. Field leaves a daughter, Nancy, of Oakland; a son, David, of San Rafael; and a daughter, Melanie, a son-in-law, John Lacuadra, and a grandson, Dante Lacuadra, of Novato.

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