

# ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES

## ADVOCACY POLLS: HIRED GUNS OR LOOSE CANNONS?

By Humphrey Taylor

Several times each month we at Harris (and, presumably, our friends and competitors at the other major polling firms) are approached by a trade association, corporation or special interest group, or their PR firms, to conduct "hired gun" research. Although this is almost never stated bluntly, the real purpose of these surveys is not to find out what people actually think about an issue, but to provide and publish poll results to influence policymakers. This research is used, as the drunkard uses the lamp-post, more for support than for enlightenment.

Only very rarely does even the most crass client say, "These are the results I want." But, some people who buy research think of it not so much as a way of getting objective information as an extension of advertising or public relations, where he who pays the piper gets the tune he wants.

Sometimes it's easy to distinguish between clients who want to do bonafide research—who want to know what public attitudes really are—and those who just want a favorable result, even if it's misleading, which they can use for advocacy purposes. But often the borderline is more difficult to define. Asking them three questions can help the survey organization find out what potential clients are up to.

(1) *Is it your intention to publish the results or are they for your internal use?* If they are for internal use, for communications planning, for example, then it is far less likely the survey organization is being hired as advocate.

(2) *Are you willing to pay for and let be designed a "fair, balanced, and comprehensive" survey?* "Fair and balanced" sounds simple but may not be. It means including not only good questions that measure agreement with clients' point of view, but also *questions which measure agreement with their opponents' positions*. The word "comprehensive" is equally important. *All the major issues* of relevance should be covered, not just those which may reflect favorably on clients' positions.

(3) *Will you agree that the report of survey findings will either be published in full or not published at all?* This is vital. If a client can pick and choose which results to release, the temptation to publish the favorable ones and suppress the unfavorable ones can be irresistible.

Sometimes even ground rules like these are not enough. In 1975, Britain held a referendum on whether or not to stay in the European Community. The "Keep Britain in Europe" campaign commissioned regular polls from Harris and agreed to all the above conditions. But there was a loophole. Each poll was a separate survey which, following our rules, could be published in full or suppressed in full. When the results were favorable (with a majority in favor of continued community membership), they published this good news; when they were not, they gave the bad news the deep six.

Today a lot of opinion data seems to be finding its way into print from sources that should be suspect. For example, I noted 60 reports of polls in *USA Today* during a 5-week period in August and September. More than a quarter of these (17) were conducted or commissioned by organizations which would appear to have a vested interest in the results coming out a certain way. There was no way a reader could tell, without seeing the full report, how fair, balanced, and comprehensive these surveys were. They may all have been exemplary but, being a suspicious fellow, I have my doubts.

One might think that the problem is simply one of "just asking good questions." Unfortunately, it's not that simple. It is necessary to look at all the questions asked, the order in which they are asked and (vitaly important) the questions which were not asked. On almost any controversial issue—from abortion to gun control, capital gains tax to national health insurance, or capital punishment to nuclear policy—a creative analyst can write hundreds of acceptable questions. The choice of which ones to ask is crucial. Furthermore, a loaded projectile question (i.e., "Do you agree or disagree that..."), which would be totally unacceptable

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by itself, can be a very good question if it is part of a balanced and strictly ordered list of questions with different points of view or arguments pro and con.

To understand the huge potential for abuse, it's worth remembering that even when the polls are trying to measure attitudes with impartiality, they can produce very different findings on the same issue. Different questions on abortion, Contra aid, gun control or welfare can yield conflicting results. A NORC survey reported that 22% believed we are "spending too little on welfare," while fully 61% thought we were "spending too little on assistance to the poor." The *New York Times* found that only 29% favored a constitutional amendment "prohibiting abortions," while 50% backed a constitutional amendment "protecting the life of the unborn." In two recent Harris surveys, "the American health care system" was much less unpopular than "the health care system."

Were I a lobbyist with a strong point of view, I (or any competent pollster) could without much difficulty write a series of questions which might be technically acceptable, but which—taken together or separately—would mislead the media and many legislators into believing that public support for my position is much stronger than it really is. And here I'm not talking at all about bad samples or manipulating data to get the answers I want, only about the design of the questionnaire itself.

In the last year, surveys conducted by four different polling organizations all reported sizeable majorities of Americans favoring a new law (like that in Massachusetts) requiring all (or most) employers to provide a basic health insurance package for their employees. Only one, that I'm aware of, found a majority opposed. Instinctively, I looked to see who had paid for this surprising survey. It turned out that the client was a business association implacably opposed to mandatory health benefits. Poll findings like these—and there are dozens, possibly hundreds like them—make you think twice. And they encourage our critics. It behooves polling firms to put our house in order. If we don't, one day someone else may try to do it for us.

The National Council on Published Polls (to which almost all the reputable national firms

belong) has an admirable code of disclosure with a list of important information which must be released, including the sample size, methodology, fieldwork dates. Perhaps the most important questions, though, are who paid for the survey and why. If the subject is controversial and relevant to current federal or state legislation, and the client is an organization with a direct interest in that legislation—WATCH OUT. The chances that the poll is misleading are not 100%, but they are high. Caveat lector!

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### WHY IS THIS LINE GOING DOWN?

**QUESTION:** "How often do you read the newspaper—every day, a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never?"

%  
saying 'every day'

1972	69%
1975	66
1977	62
1978	57
1982	54
1983	56
1985	53
1986	54
1987	55
1988	51
1989	50

**NOTE:** Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey.