

People Who Count

Polling in a new century

By Evans Witt



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Kojak, the late, lamented New York police lieutenant in the world of television entertain-

ment, was known for his bald head and for his trademark question, "Who loves you, baby?"

We pollsters might like to think that the answer to Kojak's question, when applied to our profession, would be that the public loves us. The truth

today is that, at best, the public tolerates pollsters. At worst, they think we are for sale to the highest bidder.

For a profession completely dependent on the kindness of strangers, that is bad news indeed.

This is not to say that there is no good news from the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey:

- About three-quarters of the public (78%) said polls on social and political issues serve a useful purpose.
- About the same percentage (76%) said polls are very useful or somewhat useful to elected and government officials in understanding how the public feels. And it is comforting that policy leaders agreed: an equal 76% of the experts said polls are very useful or somewhat useful in their work.
- Eighty-one percent of the public said that, when people answer public opinion polls, most do so honestly. And 84% said polls may not be perfect, but they are one of the best means available for communicating the public's views.

But that is about as far as the good news goes. It should be scant comfort to the polling industry, which is caught today in a vise: amid greater and greater demand for surveys, the public is increasingly skeptical of the industry's ethics and output.

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The public is not sure about the scientific basis for polls. What value Americans see in polling is dribbling away through misuse. They say pollsters aren't asking the right questions to get at what they really think. And they think that polls can be twisted and tortured to produce whatever results d e e p - pocketed sponsors desire.

As pollsters, we worry about declining response rates and technological advances that make it harder and harder to get respondents on the telephone. Perhaps we should be more worried about what we are doing as a profession that is hurting our credibility with the public. After all, according to a November survey by the Pew Research Center, pollsters were rated lower by the public for their performance in Election 2000 than talk show hosts and campaign consultants.

As a profession, pollsters face a basic lack of understanding from the public on bedrock issues. Only 50% of respondents to the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* poll agreed that polling is based on sound scientific practices, with 43% disagreeing. And the survey results didn't reflect a great deal of discrimination between polls done with good methodology and those done with lousy methodology.

Clearly, the profession has a lot of explaining to do. And there is still more to the public's complaints:

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- Four out of five Americans (80%) said poll questions don't give people the opportunity to say what they really think about an issue.

- Large majorities of all three groups surveyed think polls are at best

only somewhat useful to officials.

And among these less-enthusiastic strata, substantial portions of the public (58%), policy leaders (73%) and media (61%) said that poll results can be twisted to say whatever you want them to say.

- Only a third of the public (33%) said that polls accurately reflect what the public thinks at least most of the time. A resounding 53% said that polls do so only some of the time. And 11% said they hardly ever do so.

Before any pollster rises up to attack these views as ignorant or wrong-headed, one must admit that the public

basically has it right, a statement that should come as no surprise to anyone who does polls. [Of course, if a fellow pollster would like to attack this survey's questions or methodology, that is just the day-to-day reality of the public opinion business.]

The proliferation of polls designed to push a given agenda—an area of the business that has exploded in the past two decades—makes some pollsters no more than glorified advertising copywriters. When a poll is commissioned to push an agenda—from saving the rain forest to protecting gunowners' rights or supporting a new tax break—the point is *not* to explore the issue carefully, completely and dispassionately. The point is to *push* the agenda.

For example, recently a poll was released that drew the headline, "Americans for Gun Safety: 86% Support Closing the Gun Show Loophole." Surprise, surprise, surprise—the poll results supported the sponsor's views. And you can be sure that, if a poll designed to push an agenda finds results that are harmful to that agenda, the poll is never released.

Furthermore, if there are questions that might add understanding to a poll but might un-

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dermine the message, those questions are never added to the questionnaire. (For despite backsliding, disclosure of results is the rule. An unintended consequence of this essential rule of ethics is that questions that could give results dangerous to the sponsor's goals are never asked.)

How has the industry reached this state? There are many factors and many demands that have changed the survey field. Here are at least two of the forces instrumental in bringing about this change:

First, the pollsters whose main occupation is getting candidates elected have broadened their endeavors. Elections occur only so often, generating a roller-coaster flow of business. Adding corporate work, special-interest surveys and even media surveys to the portfolio evens out the bumps in the cash flow. It's good business.

Good political pollsters ask tough questions and are uncompromising in their ethics and their judgment. But political pollsters come from a background where the focus for the client is clear: getting the client elected to office. Every effort is directed toward that goal. Doing polls for public release is not the point; doing polls to help the candidate is. Such tactics as extreme sampling strategies and unfairly loaded questions are sometimes required to aid the campaign. All of these approaches can be perfectly appropriate within the context of confidential polls conducted for a campaign.

And in making the transition to polls that will be publicly released and compared to the results of other surveys, most political pollsters know that such approaches are not appropriate. They

adhere to much the same standards as other pollsters when they do polls to be published.

But where does one draw the line? Is the object to chart public opinion accurately, or is it to advance the client's goals? Obviously, it is possible to do both at once. And that is what good pollsters try to do, whether their background is in polling for candidates or polling in the academic realm.

But it is a fine line: when does providing good service to the client cross into bad polling practice? When does cutting a question out of a survey come because the client does not like the question—or might not like the results? When does choosing the population to sample—say, registered voters rather than the general public—

come because the results will be better for the client from the chosen population, instead of because it is the appropriate population?

The fundamental retort to the public's critique of polling today is simple: agenda-pushing polls seem to work. They get journalists' attention, and they generate news stories.

Among media respondents, 85% say polls have at least a moderate role in setting the public policy agenda. And 88% of the journalists see a substantial role for polls in the public information push to explain a new policy.

That brings us to the second change that has been key to public perceptions: the incredible increase in the importance



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of polls in journalism, as evidenced by the proliferation of media polls, the tradition by which I came to the polling profession. News organizations conduct surveys to serve as the basis for news stories, a goal that may not be completely pure. But at least news organizations are concerned about credibility and accuracy and are not pushing a candidate, an agenda or an issue.

With more and more polls for news organizations, though, good research design is too often being turned on its head. Good research starts with a theory or hypothesis about what one will find. The problem is that too many times in recent years, journalists hold such strong views about what the polls *should* find that they cannot accept what the polls *do* find. Just look at the Monica Lewinsky situation: journalists made crystal clear their disgust with President Clinton's behavior and their expectation that he might be driven from office. But it was also clear, in poll after poll conducted for news organizations, that the public, though upset with

Clinton the man, was still rather satisfied with the job he was doing as president. After weeks of this, the journalists expressed skepticism and dismay about poll results that contradicted their own preconceptions.

The danger is that the news organization wants poll results to illustrate the story, which the editors and journalists have already started to draft. So the questions are crafted to fit the theme of

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the story, not to plumb the public's views clearly. In an era of tightening news budgets, good methodology—which does indeed cost money—is shoved aside in the pursuit for a quick number to stick in the latest story. Just as in the corporate world, if the results don't fit the story's theme, the poll may never see the light of day.

The polling profession is caught in a conundrum, not unlike the one faced by the politicians who are the clients of many pollsters.

A politician who relies on polls is seen as a spineless officeholder whose every move is dictated by the whims of public opinion, not by adherence to “higher principles” or the “greater good.” But the public also wants its elected officials to reflect its views, not just some philosophical bent. And how do the officials determine the public's views? By taking a poll!

For pollsters, the dilemma is real as well. Polls are a useful tool, as policymakers make tough decisions and then talk to the public about those decisions. But the more frequently the public sees polls that are clearly crafted to push an agenda, not to portray public opinion, and the more often the public sees media polls designed to highlight preconceived notions, the more likely the public is to distrust our work.

Polling on social and policy issues is based, at one level, on a fundamental transaction: each sampled member of the public provides his or her opinions to the pollster for free. In exchange, the respondents believe their answers give the pollster an updated reading of Public Opinion writ large, a reading that can be of value to the public good, somehow, somewhere.

Today, the public thinks that pollsters may not be holding up their end of the bargain. Should that become the predominant public view, the future of polling could be placed in jeopardy. ●