

# Why *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Doesn't Poll

By Jim Naughton

Several years ago, I unwisely agreed to be on a panel of survey consumers at a University of Michigan symposium about political polling. What I didn't expect to happen of course did: I was the first speaker on the first panel on the first day of a conference studded with Gallups and Harrises and Ropers and Teeters. Abashed, I fell back on truth. I described how much at sea I had felt when, as a reporter, enormous printouts were thrust at me on deadline and I was obliged to turn them into news. It put me at a major disadvantage, I said, to have to choose what to write without sufficient time or insight and to rely not on my own reporting but on the wit of a pollster whose data literally had been dropped on my desk.

Heaven knows if the comments had any value to the academic audience, and the discussion soon veered, mercifully, in several other directions. I later learned from a colleague, Jules Witcover, in the audience that a young woman student sitting next to him had neatly written in block letters the title of the conference, then a Roman numeral I, followed in caps and lower case by the topic of the first panel, and then a capital A, followed by my name, underlined, and, finally, a colon. She listened to my remarks and then wrote this incredibly concise and unfortunately accurate summary:

## Professes Ignorance

I don't feel much smarter today, but I've spent a fair amount of time in the interim considering the use of survey data in newspapering. So far as we can tell without conducting an exhaustive study (or taking a survey), *The Philadelphia Inquirer* may have the only metropolitan newsroom in the nation which conducts no—none, nada, zero, bubkes—polls.

We didn't set out to be contrary. Somewhere along the way, we concluded that there already were more media surveys than useful, and that surveys undertaken regularly by many publications—"The Hoosier Poll has found..."—took on lives of their own, whether they had anything meaningful to report or not. While we could appreciate the use of polls as instruments of self-promotion in competitive marketplaces, we had other concerns.

One was news focus. Newsrooms that used surveys invariably did so in political campaigns. That risked making the survey data—or, worse, the newspaper—the focus of the political dialogue rather than whatever harebrained ideas the candidates were advocating.

Another was temptation. It's no secret that media coverage of candidates is at its worst when concentrated on who is (or we think is) ahead. And the presence of horse-race data seems to lead ineluctably to its use. We didn't want to be tempted.

Oh, we dabbled for a few years in exit surveys. They struck us, piously, as more valid because they couldn't influence the outcome but could help us declare it. Then there was the night of the tally in an important local election, a night on which our pollster obviously got something wrong and kept fiddling, on deadline, with his data to get it to conform to the outcome. This was unnerving. We decided to get out of exit surveys.

All these things don't even deal with generic concerns. Surveys are snapshots of attitudes that can, do, and probably should change as fast as possible. They're only as good as the pollster. They're not even that good once the universe has been halved or quartered or whatevered. They're *advertised*, if done properly, as

beset with margins of error. When you start provoking pollsters to explain what margin of error actually means, you discover that the pollster started somewhere under 100 percent—usually they'll admit to 95—before even applying the margin of error because, hey, nobody's perfect.

There are occasions when survey data are really valuable in explaining why things turned out as they did, or in grappling with how attitudes affect events. There are times I wish we could quantify attitudes about important public policy issues. But the value of those data tend to be so diluted by the proliferation of less-valued data that nobody pays attention to the best of it; nobody seems to know how to tell when it's worth paying attention.

Ultimately, alas, we've concluded that, at least for us, surveys are a waste. Of the reader's time, mostly. We once had a pollster offer us a year's worth of questions piggybacked once a month on a national survey because the pollster was determined to prove that, done "the right way," they would be so invaluable that we would shower the pollster with money the following year. Hell, by the fifth or sixth month we couldn't get anyone even to pose questions on the free surveys because no one found the data that persuasive or timely or valued.

And there is the basic issue of cost. To conduct a survey quickly and well costs more than a new convertible. More to the point, it costs as much as a new fulltime reporter. Hmmm; do we want to spend 50 grand on survey data everyone will forget by tomorrow, or on the writer of a year's worth of memorable leads? It isn't even a close call.

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