

The Perception of Bias in Polling: What Should We Expect of Caesar's Wife?

Earlier this summer, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* severed its relationship with the University of Cincinnati's Ohio Poll after learning that its director, Alfred Tuchfarber, had donated money to the campaign of the state's Republican gubernatorial candidate. *Enquirer* editor and vice president Lawrence Beaupre called the contributions a "conflict of interest" while noting that he had "no reason to believe any of the polls were biased."

Since pollsters routinely deal with perceptions of bias in their work, *Public Perspective* asked leading polling practitioners and journalists to weigh in with responses to the following: "What are the standards regarding political participation by pollsters who collaborate with or are employed by media outlets? What should the standards be? What political activities, if any, are acceptable—voting, party registration, contributing money or time to a campaign or interest group, making your support or views public, discussing poll results with political candidates? What political activities would you deem a tough call in determining a possible conflict of interest?"

We find it hard to imagine that a researcher could spend a career in public affairs polling without forming strong views on many of the issues on which he or she polls, and on candidates who take opposing stands on these issues. For opinion researchers, as for others charged with pursuing truth as best they can while exploring matters about which they care, handling the problem of bias is a constant challenge. The dispute involving the *Enquirer* and Professor Tuchfarber invites us to explore one facet of this large and important subject.

The University of Cincinnati's Public Response

The University of Cincinnati has announced its strong and continuing support for the Ohio Poll under the directorship of Dr. Alfred Tuchfarber. "The Ohio Poll is one of the best polls in the US and has developed a very high degree of accuracy because of its excellent scientific methods," said Robert Gesteland, UC vice president for research and university dean for advanced studies.

The University recognizes that the credibility of the Ohio Poll has been questioned because of modest political donations made by Dr. Tuchfarber and understands the perceptions created by those donations, said Greg Hand, UC spokesperson. "However, as an institution, we continue to stand behind the integrity of the polls, and the public opinion research of the Institute for Policy Research."

Gesteland noted that Tuchfarber founded the poll in 1981 and has continuously improved it through a rigorous scientific approach. "The Ohio Poll has, in effect, been a laboratory for the scientific improvement of polling methods," Gesteland said. Since the November 1994 election, the Ohio Poll has correctly predicted every election in Ohio where it made a projection.

—University of Cincinnati, Public Relations
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A Contrue Vote for the Correct Standards

By Alfred Tuchfarber

I plead guilty to committing the mortal sin of making political contributions. Over the years, I made \$600 in political donations to Bob Taft, the Republican candidate for governor in Ohio because he has been a personal friend since our kids went to preschool together. What's more, I plead guilty to having made other small campaign contributions to personal friends who are Democrats and Charterites (a local progressive party in Cincinnati), and Republicans.

Here, we have been asked by our editor to comment on some provocative questions about what public pollsters should be proscribed from doing. There aren't many public pollsters

to begin with, but my guess is that even if you eliminated inclusion of voting from the list we were asked to consider, the number of political pollsters who are "pure" would dwindle perilously close to a null set.

But, are these the correct standards to consider? Let me pose a rhetorical question: Are we as a discipline prepared to accept the notion that *any* political activity by a public pollster compromises his or her credibility? If not, what are the appropriate standards? There is only one standard that should really matter: whether our polls accurately reflect public opinion.

At every election we have an opportunity to demonstrate our scientific survey skills and accuracy. We do it at great professional risk. Those of you who are pollsters know the stark terror you feel as the election results roll in on election night and you, personally, bear the risk of losing credibility if your projections are wrong. Do we get it right? Are we accurate? Those are the only sensible standards. Let the *truth* (the election results) prove or disprove our legitimacy or bias.

As was presented in a detailed paper at the American Association for Public Opinion Research meetings last spring and as is borne out by the 1998 elections to date, the Ohio Poll, after being completely redesigned in 1994, has correctly projected every election on which it polled (10 of 10) in Ohio from 1994 through 1998.

I'll stand on that record. So will the University of Cincinnati. And, by the way, in the two elections (1990 and 1994) where the Ohio Poll projected a race in which Bob Taft was a candidate, his final vote percentage was *underestimated* by one-half of one percent (0.5%) each time.

Alfred Tuchfarber is director of the Institute for Policy Research, University of Cincinnati

The Enquirer Was Hasty

By James Barnes

Using the standards for pollsters in Washington as a benchmark, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* may have been a bit hasty in ending its co-sponsorship of the University of Cincinnati's Ohio Poll after learning that Alfred Tuchfarber, the survey's director, had made political contributions to Republican gubernatorial nominee Bob Taft.

The *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News employ two respected but dedicated partisan pollsters, Democrat Peter D. Hart and Republican Robert M. Teeter, to conduct, jointly, their surveys. Likewise, the folks at *US News and World Report* have used GOP survey researcher Ed Goetas and Democratic numbers-cruncher Celinda Lake to poll for them. Sure, the bipartisan make-up of the Hart-Teeter and Goetas-Lake teams would seem to protect their joint polls from tilting towards one party or the other, but if one insists on a Caesar's wife standard, the results of these projects would have to be called into question. Given the backgrounds of the polls' authors, can consumers of these data be 100% certain that some partisan bias didn't slip into the survey's make-up, albeit unintentionally?

Even though, according to *Enquirer* editor Lawrence Beaupre, there's no evidence of bias in Tuchfarber's polls, it follows from Beaupre's analysis that ongoing joint ventures like the Hart-Teeter relationship should be ended.

But where does this standard for purity end? My guess is that every week during the election season, newspapers all over the country are citing polls overseen by university professors, or other supposedly non-partisan sources, to assess the status of local or statewide races. But journalists who seek a local analysis of a race that gets beyond the party spin doctors who reside in Washington don't know whether these individuals are registered Democrats or Republicans, what political contributions they or their spouses make, or whether these pollsters/professors have been involved in any groups that participate in issue advocacy. If a university professor who conducts a poll is also a member of the Sierra Club, should credibility questions about the poll's findings be raised?

A news organization, quite properly, has to be concerned about conflicts of interest and even perceived conflicts of interest that would call its credibility into question. Those are marks that reporters hold public officials to all the time.

My experience working with pollsters at CNN and CBS is that they are consummate professionals. While their results are criticized, often because of how reporters and producers choose to emphasize certain findings, I have never detected partisan bias in their polls and have no reason to believe it exists at other news organizations. Still, as long as these folks are employees of news organizations, they should be held to the same conflict standards that exist for reporters.

In this area, employees of news organizations should be free to choose any partisan registration as well as vote in primaries and general elections. Contributions are a harder call. Reporters shouldn't be writing checks, but it's OK if a spouse does. It seems hard to argue otherwise, because reporters have spouses who are involved in partisan politics or hold political appointments in government.

The burden is on each news organization to set its own rules so it is satisfied no actual conflict exists. Some may want a high standard that rules out any perception of a conflict. Others may find it sufficient for their editors, producers, and reporters who interpret and write about the data to bear the conflict standards, and not survey researchers who act as consultants or outside contractors to news organizations.

In Tuchfarber's case, because the *Enquirer's* editors say they didn't believe that his contributions reflected a pro-Taft or pro-Republican bias in his polling, perhaps a simple disclosure of his political contributions would have been sufficient to let readers decide whether they could trust his numbers.

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