

The Polling Business

Pollsters Must Be Above Suspicion

By Kathleen Frankovic

American pollsters have been under greater stress from politicians in recent years, but that development may be testimony more to media polls' increased importance to the political process than to the likelihood of ethical problems.

Harry Truman called George Gallup a "Republican pollster" when he and the other public pollsters said Truman was trailing. The Dole campaign decried "Democratic bias" in polls and poll-takers when the GOP candidate was running far behind. Clearly, candidates feel they have to combat negative poll results because polling has succeeded in gaining a reputation for providing accurate and accepted measures of public opinion—more unbiased than attack ads, more believable than campaign speeches.

Poll results are discounted by criticizing either the methodology or the individual. The most effective attacks are those that use the code words attached to polling—questions are "biased" or "leading;" weighting is done when it shouldn't be or is not done when it should be or is simply "wrong." Worse, the media polls can be categorized as "push polls"—a term that now extends to cover any question containing information that might be construed as negative. Campaigns have become skilled in using polling's rules against their "enemy," the pollster.

In this climate, a media pollster **MUST** make sure he or she hasn't created the justification for any attack on partisan grounds or any appearance of a conflict of interest. That means that, like Caesar's wife, the pollster must be above suspicion, or at least appear to be. Journalists have understood this for a long time. On the other hand, university communities' commitment to academic freedom means that academics can hold and express political beliefs while keeping their research free of bias. With so many academics now conducting media polls, and doing so in the more personal venue of state and local politics, these two standards were bound to clash.

Pollsters, like professors, have friends; but clearly an otherwise-innocent act of donating money to a longtime friend puts the appearance of objectivity at significant risk, especially in the current attack-mode campaign environment.

What can a media pollster do? Only what preserves one's ability to react as a citizen without creating the opening for political attack. Voting is a given, party registration (to preserve a voice in critical primaries) is necessary. One can't donate money to any candidate on whom one conducts a poll (in the last 20 years, my only candidate donation has been to a friend starting a primary campaign for state assembly which I would never poll; she left the race after a short time). I give money instead to cultural institutions. One certainly can't

campaign, sport a button or bumper sticker, or make a speech. At the same time, one can't force family and friends to refrain from exercising their political views, though I suppose that too could be open for attack in this over-heated campaign environment.

We need to realize that *all* our writings and presentations can be suspect. Any one who wants to discredit us as partisan could do so if we tell an anti-Clinton or anti-Gingrich joke in a public forum. Or if we let only one side know our poll results before publication, or provide additional information about a poll to only one campaign. If value judgments creep into our analyses, or if we assume that the rest of the world thinks as we do deep inside, we give those in the political world the opportunity to call us partisans. That is just as damaging to polling's place in society as actual political bias.

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director of polling, CBS News*

Trust No One

By Cliff Zukin

As elsewhere, politics in New Jersey is a blood sport. The stakes of political power are real, the game is played hard, and occasionally rules—like truth—are bent. Small things can be escalated to significance by people or groups looking for partisan advantage. When there is "bad news"—and poll results are almost always bad news for someone—there is no shortage of guns aimed at the messenger.

And even though one works for a university or media organization, there is no real anonymity. If you do your job well and long enough, you yourself become a prominent player. New Jersey is a small place, and it is impossible for statewide actors not to stumble across each other's paths. I'm a name and a face to the last four governors of New Jersey.

It is within this environment that public pollsters work. The most precious resource we have is our credibility. Thus, it is important for us to err on the side of caution in our public acts so as not to give others ammunition with which to attack our findings. I believe that when we accept such a position we are also accepting the role of a political neutral, much as journalists accept norms of their profession. We speak for an institution, not for ourselves. There is a tacit acceptance that we give up some private voice in order to play a public role.

We have a self-imposed responsibility not to engage in any *public* behavior that displays a partisan preference. This would include giving money to a party or candidate in an election one is polling, and probably extends even to elections where one is not professionally active. If there is evidence of a pollster's partisan preference, the other party will certainly

use this to attack credibility *regardless* of whether they believe the polls results to be accurate. The appearance of impropriety can be just as damning as any actual impropriety. Is it worth the risk? I think not.

At the other extreme the private act of voting is also an easy line to draw. The curtain of the ballot booth masks how I personally feel about the candidates and my evaluations of their abilities.

Contributing money to political groups and causes I would like to support is a tougher call. Unlike in partisan elections, it is hard to know in advance what issues might be on the agenda and whether any might present a real or apparent conflict of interest. But I try to avoid this situation by not giving to political groups in New Jersey.

A maxim: In politics act honorably, but refuse to believe that others will do so.

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Life Is Not Fair

By Sheldon R. Gawiser

Maybe it is just part of why parents don't spend a lot of time encouraging their children to grow up to be pollsters: it's a tough life. It is easy for almost anyone to criticize a poll and easier to criticize a pollster. For public pollsters, life is even more difficult.

Because those of us who work in the media have to be viewed as objective, we give up some of the rights and privileges that others have. One of those is the ability to support candidates for office, political parties, and interest groups. I often feel the constraints of the working journalist as I am unable to participate fully in political discourse. In fact, Caesar's wife had it easier.

Most media organizations place restrictions on their journalists' activities outside of work. These often include a prohibition of any actions which might "appear" to imply a conflict of interest. This includes working for candidates, making campaign contributions, and advocating positions on issues. Journalists give up some rights because of their occupation; so do pollsters. Public pollsters must adhere to the same standards. After all, we help the journalist by providing an unbiased measure of public opinion.

We all know that the best media, public polls, and pollsters are attacked from both sides of each issue; when all sides are dissatisfied, the pollster is probably doing a pretty good job of objective measurement. Some of us get concerned whenever one side or another really likes our poll results.

I do not mean to imply in any way that pollsters must be automatons, without passion or ideals. Rather, we have to "check our opinions at the door." It is difficult enough to design and administer unbiased questionnaires, to provide good quality field work, and to produce the insightful, unbiased analysis that public polling requires. When even the appearance of a conflict of interest occurs, that job becomes much more difficult. And it may be even harder if you have put your money and support behind one candidate.

So take heart and realize that life is not fair. And may none of your children grow up to be pollsters.

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The Appearance of Bias Undermines Confidence

By Jim Norman

I'm a little leery of the basic concept of setting standards for a polling firm. Any standards *USA Today* might set would mostly be about appearances—and appearances don't always have much to do with reality. I've worked with people whose political views were a secret to the general public, but who were more interested in writing questions that vindicated their political beliefs than in getting the true picture of public opinion. And, conversely, I've had co-workers whose politics were out there for anyone to see but who had the intellectual curiosity and integrity to explore all sides of an issue.

So the question is, "Should there be any standards?" And, as much as it galls me to admit it, standards—that is to say appearances—matter... a lot. In fact, in journalism one doesn't have to get to the reading (or viewing) public before they start to matter. Some reporters and editors form opinions about the polling companies their paper or network uses based on appearances rather than the actual work done. Reporters, especially, can be susceptible to the ear-whisperings of a spinmeister that a pollster's findings are biased, and "Did you know that ..."

If this can happen within the newsroom, where journalists have access to the actual polling work and can decide for themselves, it's easy to see how the appearance of bias can harm confidence among the general public. And once a company gets a reputation as being pro-Democratic or pro-Republican, the label is hard to shake.

The standards for *USA Today* are few and basic:

— Don't contract with political candidates or parties for polling, analysis, or consulting;