

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;