
The Polling Business

— Key people at the company should not campaign in any form for a candidate or party; and,

— Key people should not contribute money to a candidate or party.

That's it. It would be nice if the key people in a firm were all registered as independents. It would be splendid if they didn't even vote. But it seems improper to require individuals to take such steps. In sum, keep the standards—the appearances—to a minimum, and put maximum effort into the reality of making the polls as unbiased as possible.

Jim Norman is polling director, USA Today

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

By Warren J. Mitofsky

When the head of an American satellite company made major campaign contributions to the Democratic Party, 40% of Americans thought this action influenced the Clinton administration's decision to let US companies continue working with China on satellite launches (CBS News/*New York Times* poll, June 10, 1998). Maybe it did influence the decision and maybe it did not. At this time, we do not know. What we do know is that the administration's credibility is in question.

Similarly, a pollster who works for a candidate or a party is publicly recognized as a spinmeister for a cause. Peter Hart and Bob Teeter, who used to compete in the presidential political arena, have teamed up to produce public polls for NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*. Have they completely shed their past partisanship? Do they counterbalance each other's political views? Or do they trade loaded questions favoring one party or the other? Regardless, the credibility of their polls will be an issue to some.

Where do we draw the line between openly public partisanship and more private political behavior? Will our polls lose credibility if we register to vote in one party's primaries or if we give money to a candidate? Will our polls be credible if we vote for candidates of one party more often than the other? Surely most pollsters have political opinions that guide their private behavior, even if they manage to keep it out of public view. "Don't ask, don't tell" seems to be the only basis for dealing with the partisanship we all harbor to one degree or another.

Several things seem clear. First, the credibility of a poll is important. Second, public partisan activity by pollsters will diminish or impair the credibility of their polls. Third, there is no logical place to draw a line; we must judge pollsters' work, not their former or implicit partisanship.

*Warren Mitofsky is president of
Mitofsky International*

Working Both Sides of the Street

By Robert M. Worcester

The position of political opinion pollsters in the US has been like a hand grenade with the pin pulled, waiting to go off. I've long marvelled at my friends in the business of conducting private polls in America for one political party or another trying to explain on TV how their polls were somehow different than those of the public pollsters. I knew—we all knew—that the tools of our trade don't allow that.

I've been grateful that the convention here in Britain is that we work both for the news media and for the parties and do not take a partisan approach. From time to time I have worked simultaneously for the Labour Party (directly, for 17 years), the *Daily Express*, which is the national newspaper arguably farthest to the right, for the Tories, and for the *Daily Mirror*, which supported Labour.

During my nearly 30 years of polling in Britain, MORI has worked for all three major parties, several fringe parties, nearly every newspaper group, and for both major television networks at one time or another while, for over two decades, doing the polls of record for the *London Times*. However, I have always taken the position since beginning to work both sides of the street—private polling for parties and public polling for the media—that I would not vote, would not make contributions, and would not participate in any activity that would show partisanship in any way. Support for interest groups is, however, another matter and there my conscience is my guide.

Perhaps the toughest call was some years ago when I was approached to do a poll for publication by the Palestine Liberation Organization. My initial reaction was to say no. My colleagues asked me to sleep on it. In the morning I laid down four conditions: 1) We state we are working for the PLO, not any front group; 2) We write the questions; 3) Everything is published; and, 4) We are paid up front. The PLO agreed. We did the poll, and it ran on the main nightly news on both channels; both made the point that MORI stood behind the findings. Of course, it helps enormously that the terms and conditions with our clients provide that we hold the copyright, clear the copy and graphics, and that the data are released in full upon publication, and if not published in the event of an editorial decision not to publish, are released by MORI seven days after the date of intended publication.

Robert Worcester is chairman of MORI (UK)