

Silence is Golden

By G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Polling on behalf of a media concern stands at the intersection of two related but distinct enterprises: public opinion survey research and journalism. Each purports to “objectively” report facts which have been gathered ethically. The demands of each require special care lest either be damaged.

Ideally, one should be unable to tell from the questions asked or the interpretations given for any public poll where the researchers personally stand on the issues covered by the survey. If a poll conducted by a researcher who holds “pro-life” views differs markedly from one conducted by another who is “pro-choice,” questions should be raised *prima facie* as to whether the highest standards were adhered to.

But beyond that, a special responsibility exists when survey research is an intimate part of reportage. The appearance of objectivity, as well as its reality, is vital. For that reason, it is generally best if those engaged in media polling refrain from taking public stands, directly or indirectly, on the matters about which their surveys inquire. Of course, it is natural for pollsters, who are often quite political animals, to hold opinions. But why jeopardize the perceived objectivity of our results by being identified with one camp or the other?

One should, therefore, not endorse a candidate, contribute to a cause, join an interest group, or otherwise take a public position that makes it easy for readers to say, “What did you expect? After all, pollsters are (fill in the blank); of course they would find the public agrees with them.” People in general are probably all too willing to assume that results are infinitely malleable in theory and commonly manipulated in practice. Neither journalism nor survey research is helped by furthering that notion.

That said, it should be emphasized that surreptitious participation in a cause is worse than open involvement. I see

no problem discussing results (once gathered) with candidates or advocates if one is willing to do so with all sides. And “private” information should not be divulged. If the Republicans or the Democrats want clarification, fine, provided each knows a similar request from the other would be granted. Generally speaking, then, such contact should be in response to a request and not initiated by the pollster; it must also be evenhanded.

In my practice, I have refused to take public stands on issues in general. The only time I divulged my views on, for example, the death penalty was when—as an expert witness in a capital case—I was ordered to do so by the judge. Moreover, I choose to be a registered independent and would do so even if I consistently were to vote a “straight ticket.”

More difficult to assess are contributions to tax exempt organizations which might be seen as having a particular view, or memberships in, for example, religious organizations. Some would say that any involvement makes it possible at least to infer where someone stands. As a rule, I draw a sharp line between “charitable” organizations and those formally engaged in changing public policy; I avoid contributing time or money to the latter. Candidly, this can be a grey area. Whatever one does should not be concealed, however. If one would be distressed to have a contribution to the Salvation Army published, then one probably ought not to give.

I am by no means arguing that one cannot be a strong partisan and yet conduct objective research. I am well aware that many feel it is better to divulge where one stands and that, if this is done, there is no damage to perceived independence. But voluntarily becoming part of the journalistic process imposes special restrictions on appropriate “speech” and it is best to err on the side of caution.

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