

## IN THE PRESS

### *Polls Shed Light on Outcomes of Political Races in North Carolina's 1992 Elections*

By Adam Hochberg

*Opinion polls conducted prior to the 1992 elections had mixed results in forecasting winners in North Carolina's top two political races—the campaigns for the Governor's Office and the U.S. Senate. Polls consistently showed Democratic candidate Jim Hunt, the eventual winner of the governor's race, leading Republican Jim Gardner. Yet, in the Senate race, Republican challenger Lauch Faircloth trailed in virtually every poll—despite his eventual victory over incumbent Democrat Terry Sanford. A closer look at survey results, however, shows that polls accurately revealed Sanford's increasing vulnerability over the course of the campaign.*

**M**ore than a year-and-a-half before the November 1992 elections, pollsters were placing odds on North Carolina's most high-profile political campaigns.<sup>1</sup> Polltakers were noting that Jim Hunt was the "clear favorite" in the governor's race, while warning that fellow Democrat Terry Sanford could face a "very tough" re-election battle in the race for the U.S. Senate.<sup>2</sup>

Some pollsters were trying to gauge political attitudes about the 1992 races as early as February 1990—when most voters still were concentrating on more immediate political fights, such as Jesse Helms' effort to win a fourth term in the U.S. Senate. Polling firms were contacting potential voters and asking them to express their preferences among a group of possible candidates. One poll, for instance, paired Democratic Attorney General Lacy Thornburg against Republican Lt. Governor Jim Gardner in the governor's race

(Gardner led 45 percent to 30 percent); Hunt against Gardner (Hunt led 52 percent to 31 percent); and Sanford against Republican Governor Jim Martin in the U.S. Senate race (a virtual tie).<sup>3</sup> [See Table 1, p. 51, for a list of pollsters involved in the 1992 Gubernatorial and U.S. Senate campaigns in North Carolina. For poll results, see Tables 2 and 3, pp. 56–57, and Figures 1 and 2, p. 58.]

#### **Election Trends Evident Early in the Campaign Season**

**P**ollsters say trends already had begun to develop in 1990 that would continue until Election Day—for both the governor's race and the U.S. Senate race in North Carolina. The large lead that Hunt enjoyed in early polls remained consistent throughout the 1991–92 campaign season. Hunt eventually captured 53 percent of the vote on Election Day, compared to Gardner's 43 percent.<sup>4</sup>

"There was no contest there," says Sue Bulluck, the president of Independent Opinion Research and Communications, a Wilmington-based polling firm. Bulluck conducted polls for *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and Raleigh television station WRAL. "Governor Hunt had a strong position, and he unified that position."

In the Senate race, however, there were signs in 1990 that Sanford wasn't as popular as an incumbent senator might expect. Sanford's favorable job performance rating was always below 50 percent, says Brad Coker, the president of Mason-

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*Adam Hochberg is a broadcast journalist who covers state government for public radio stations in North Carolina.*



**Jim Hunt waving to supporters during the 1992 campaign**

Dixon Political/Media Research Inc., a Maryland-based polling firm. "When you matched him up against basically unknown Republicans, he was only running in the low- to mid-40s," Coker says.

The Mason-Dixon polls—conducted for the *News & Record* of Greensboro, the *Morning Star* of Wilmington, and television stations WFMY in Greensboro, WBTV in Charlotte, and WCTI in New Bern—repeatedly warned of trouble for Sanford. The firm's analysis accompanying its February 1991 poll concluded that Sanford could be considered "vulnerable."<sup>5</sup> By July 1991, Mason-Dixon rated the senator "extremely vulnerable."<sup>6</sup> And in August 1992, the firm said there was a "clear indication" that Sanford could be beaten.<sup>7</sup> On Election Day, Republican Lauch Faircloth won 52 percent of the vote, compared to Sanford's 48 percent.

### **Hunt's Support Consistent, Unyielding**

**I**n the governor's race, Hunt's support was so strong and consistent in polling results that Democratic campaign organizers had to warn supporters against growing too complacent. From

1990 until Election Day, every public poll—as well as all the internal polls taken by the Hunt and Gardner campaigns<sup>8</sup>—showed Hunt ahead, often by more than 15 points. According to Bulluck, Hunt has begun campaigning with the support of about 46–48 percent of the voters every time he has run for office. "That's his bedrock vote," she says. "Any potential challenger to him is going to have to move those voters away from him—and that's a difficult task."

Polls taken early in the campaign by Gardner's supporters suggested that voters didn't know much about the Republican candidate. "We felt that we had to identify some of what he stood for and what he'd been doing as lieutenant governor," says Palmer Sugg, Gardner's campaign director. So, the campaign aired television commercials highlighting Gardner's career in business and portraying him as an opponent of tax increases.

Still, in the six months before the election, Hunt's support in the polls rarely dipped below 50 percent, while Gardner was struggling to climb above the high 30s. *The News & Observer* concluded that Hunt was in a "practically impregnable position" when it released the final Independent

***"There was no contest there. . . . Governor Hunt had a strong position, and he unified that position."***

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INDEPENDENT OPINION RESEARCH AND  
COMMUNICATIONS

Opinion Research and Communications poll on October 30.<sup>9</sup> Sugg says the Gardner campaign was struggling to overcome President George Bush's plummeting popularity, which had made it difficult to attract Democratic and independent voters to the Republican ticket.

Meanwhile, a month or so before the election, Hunt's campaign manager, Mike Davis, was contacting county campaign coordinators across the state, warning them not to take victory for granted. Davis recalls telling them: "We're doing okay, but let's keep on going. Don't take any solace in what the polls are showing."

The week before the election, the Gardner campaign unleashed a serious allegation. Gardner charged that Hunt's supporters had eavesdropped electronically on telephone calls involving the lieutenant governor and his family. The Gardner campaign further charged—in a series of news conferences and television commercials—that the information gathered from eavesdropping was fed to Hunt campaign organizers. Hunt vigorously denied the allegations. But, a year after the election, three close associates of Hunt pled guilty to charges relating to the eavesdropping, while maintaining that the governor knew nothing about the incident.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Gardner's last-minute charges apparently did little to sway voters' opinions in the 1992 election. Hunt won the election with 53 percent of the vote, close to what pollsters had predicted before the

eavesdropping allegation surfaced. Officials of both campaigns say their internal polls concluded that few voters changed their minds during the last few days of the campaign. "A lot of people have a theory that a crisis like that tends to freeze people in place," Sugg says.

## **Polls Suggested Sanford's Weakening Support**

Virtually all of the polls in the 1992 race for the U.S. Senate showed Sanford with a lead. Even two polls taken in late October put Sanford ahead. A Mason-Dixon poll conducted October 26–27 gave Sanford an eight-point lead,<sup>11</sup>

***Jim Gardner with a young supporter***



**Table 1. Pollsters that Covered Campaigns for Governor and U.S. Senate in 1992 Elections in North Carolina**

Firm	Address	Phone	Clients
Dynamic Marketing	(Not Available)	(Not Available)	WSOC-TV (Charlotte)
Fabrizio & McLaughlin	Suite 312 801 N. Fairfax St. Alexandria, VA 22314	(703) 684-4510	Campaigns for Lauch Faircloth and Jim Gardner
Hickman-Brown	Suite 206 1350 Conn. Ave. NW Washington, DC 20036	(202) 659-4000	Campaigns for Terry Sanford and Jim Hunt
Independent Opinion Research and Communications	Suite B-1 108 N. Kerr Ave Wilmington, NC 28405	(910) 799-9703	<i>The News &amp; Observer</i> (Raleigh), <i>Winston-Salem Journal</i> , WRAL-TV (Raleigh)
KPC Research	P.O. Box 32188 Charlotte, NC 28232	(704) 358-5755	<i>The Charlotte Observer</i> , Knight-Ridder
Mason-Dixon Political/Media Research	Suite 260 10715 Charter Drive P.O. Box 1343 Columbia, MD 21044	(410) 964-2215	<i>News &amp; Record</i> (Greensboro), <i>Morning Star</i> (Wilmington), WFMY-TV (Greensboro), WBTV (Charlotte), WCTI-TV (New Bern)

while an Independent Opinion Research and Communications poll taken October 25–28 showed him up by six.<sup>12</sup>

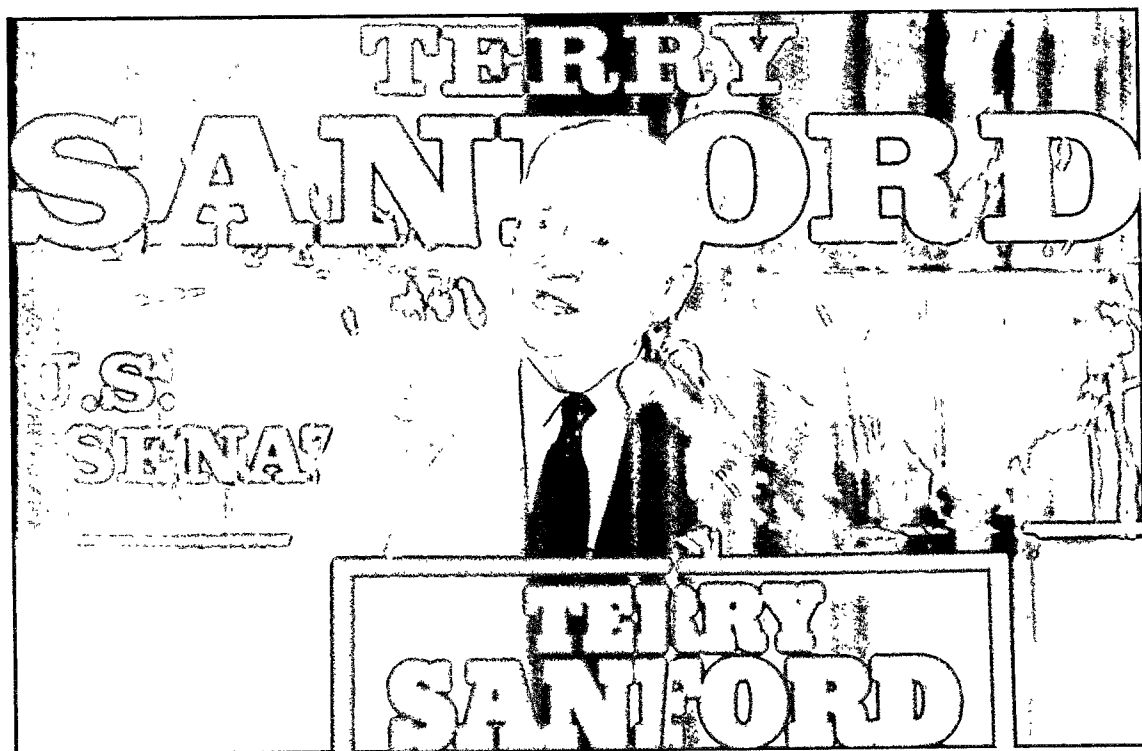
But poll-readers who looked beyond those numbers could find signs of trouble for Sanford. Through the summer and early fall, Sanford still was struggling to boost his support above the mid-40 percent range, unusually low for a well-known incumbent politician. "I think anybody who was a reasonable person would have come to the conclusion six months before the election that Sanford wasn't going to blow anybody away," says Carter Wrenn of the National Congressional Club, which helped run Faircloth's campaign. Another clue to Sanford's vulnerability was his campaign's slowness in raising money.<sup>13</sup>

To make matters worse for Sanford, a large number of voters remained undecided, even just a few weeks before the election. In the last round of polls, both Mason-Dixon and Independent Opinion Research reported that 18 percent of the electorate hadn't made up their minds yet—and the

number of undecided voters was increasing as the election got closer. "You would normally expect those [numbers of undecided voters] to be reducing, so that you'd end up with a relatively small percentage of 'not sures,'" Bulluck says. "That enlargement in the 'not sures' was a very ominous sign for the incumbent."

Bulluck—whose firm also does consulting work for political candidates—says she tried to warn Democratic campaign officials that Faircloth was building momentum. "We suggested that we saw real trouble ahead," Bulluck says. "But we got sort of a 'shoot the messenger' response."

Meanwhile, leaders of Faircloth's campaign were trying to learn more about the undecided voters. Wrenn says the campaign's pollster divided the undecided voters into different groups, using such factors as party registration and political philosophy. "Among conservative Democrats, you had a lot of undecideds," he says. "You just know that's going to fall in for the Republican candidate against a guy like Sanford."



**Terry Sanford speaking at a campaign rally**

Sanford campaign organizers say they were aware of the senator's precarious situation. Late in the race, the senator's campaign was conducting daily tracking polls. Although those polls showed Sanford with a slight lead, support for the senator was soft—still less than 50 percent—with Faircloth gaining momentum as the election neared. Sam Poole, Sanford's chief-of-staff, says Faircloth

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***"We never were able to get [Sanford] out so we could put him on television and respond to it [negative TV ads] in a positive way. . . . We could read the polls, and I knew a week or 10 days before the election that he was going to lose it."***

—SAM POOLE, SANFORD'S CHIEF-OF-STAFF

appeared to win votes with a series of television commercials that portrayed Sanford as opposed to requiring that welfare recipients work for their benefits.<sup>14</sup>

Another factor was the senator's health. Sanford was hospitalized for heart surgery in October and maintained a light campaign schedule after he was released. That, along with the senator's lack of a large campaign-fund war chest, made it difficult for him to effectively answer the welfare ads.<sup>15</sup> "We never were able to get [Sanford] out so we could put him on television and respond to it in a positive way," Poole says. "We could read the polls, and I knew a week or 10 days before the election that he was going to lose it." Sanford's health problems also may have raised questions in some voters' minds about his ability to meet the physical demands of the job.

### **Final Numbers Not the Whole Story**

**P**olling experts say the Sanford-Faircloth race is a textbook example of why poll-readers need to be concerned about more than just who's ahead and who's behind. Coker says the analysis that accompanies poll results is just as important as the numbers. Responding to critics who ques-



**Lauch Faircloth in a rare campaign appearance**

tion why his Mason-Dixon polls consistently showed Sanford with a slight lead over Faircloth before the election, Coker says: "They don't know what they're talking about, because they don't know how to read a poll." Those who read his analysis, he says, understood that Sanford's support was soft.

Walter De Vries, a former pollster who now runs the North Carolina Institute for Political Leadership in Wilmington, says interpreting survey results can be a complicated process that few people know how to do correctly. "Most people read polls like they read basketball scores," he says. Professional political analysts, however, weigh the poll results with other information about the electorate in an attempt to spot important trends.

For instance, De Vries says his polling firm put together profiles describing the kind of person who was most likely to support each candidate. Those profiles would be based on demographic information such as where voters live, as well as on so-called "issue clusters" that reflect the voters' political beliefs. Similar profiles were assembled for voters who said they were undecided. "If the profiles of the Faircloth voters matched those of a fairly good proportion of undecided voters, what you were dealing with were people who were

going to vote for Faircloth but didn't want to tell you," De Vries explains. "And that is what happened."

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—CARTER WRENN, NATIONAL CONGRESSIONAL CLUB

Another important factor to consider in interpreting poll results is the margin of error, says Thad Beyle, a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For example, a 4-percent margin of error means that the poll results may be off by as much as four points. "So, in a close race where the candidates have a 2-point differential, it could actually be a 6-point differential, or the downside candidate could actually be in the lead," Beyle says. "More to the point would be a caveat that if the race differential is anywhere near the margin of error, the race is too close to call and is probably a dead heat at the point the poll was taken." Major polls conducted for the 1992 Gubernatorial and Senate races in North Carolina had margins of error ranging from 3.5–4.0 percent.<sup>16</sup>

### News Media Often Omit Important Polling Details

Such detailed information often is not found in the colorful pie-chart graphics that newspapers and television stations use to present the results of newly released polls. But pollsters such as Coker urge journalists to include more in-depth analyses in their stories that accompany charts. "The people who subscribe to our polls get that [additional information], work it into their stories, and use it to develop their TV scripts," he says. "They also call us for comment, so we can bang it home twice with them."

Less often, however, do such analyses appear in wire-service accounts of poll results used by media outlets that don't subscribe to the poll. For instance, on October 30, 1992, the *News & Record* of Greensboro released a Mason-Dixon poll that showed Sanford leading Faircloth by 45 percent to 37 percent, with 18 percent of the voters undecided. The headline on the story read "Poll has Faircloth gaining on Sanford," and the first paragraph noted that "Sanford's support has dropped significantly since the summer." Coker was quoted in the article as saying: "Sanford remains vulnerable as his base vote continues to slip and his margin over Republican challenger Lauch Faircloth shrinks."<sup>17</sup>

But when that Mason-Dixon poll was reported by some other newspapers, only the gross numbers were included—with no analysis or discussion of election trends. For instance, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, in a 60-word story attributed to the Associated Press and staff reports, said the poll found that Sanford "holds a narrow lead over Re-

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—NICK PANAGAKIS, NATIONAL POLLSTER

publican challenger Lauch Faircloth in the U.S. Senate race."<sup>18</sup> Yet the article did not mention that Sanford's support had slipped from previous polls, nor did it include the pollster's opinion that the incumbent senator was vulnerable.

Some critics blame editorial bias for newspapers' less-than-ideal coverage of poll results. Rep. Joe Mavretic (D-Edgecombe), who tried to run for governor of North Carolina as an independent candidate in the 1992 campaign,<sup>19</sup> contends that some papers deliberately omit information or skew poll results to benefit their favored candidates.

Most observers, however, attribute such problems to over-simplistic reporting, which can lead the public to misinterpret a poll. "That's our biggest problem," Coker says. "Associated Press picks it up and some wire-service reporter boils it all down to 'Sanford has a six point lead.' Then every other 5,000-circulation newspaper in the state that can't afford to pay for polls . . . runs that [AP] story."

As one national pollster, Nick Panagakis, wrote: "If media polling suffers today, it is from a straw poll mind-set that polls must project likely outcomes. News directors and editors want to reduce the multitude of statistics produced in a poll to a single easy-to-understand horse race number on who is ahead and by how much. . . . Those who hear of an 8-point lead are led to believe that's what will happen on election day. In order for the 8-point lead to be sustained, a number of conditions must be in place: for instance, no change in voter recognition of the candidates, no new issues

which may affect voter attitudes and, most importantly—based on simple arithmetic—the undecided vote will split evenly.”<sup>20</sup> De Vries adds that the accuracy of polls also depends on how well pollsters estimate voter turnout on Election Day.

## Undecided Voters a Key Factor in Reliability of Polls

**F**ocusing on raw poll numbers is particularly misleading when surveys show large numbers of undecided voters. Polling experts say it’s a mistake to assume that undecided voters will divide equally or even proportionately between candidates—especially when polls show that the incumbent has less than 50 percent of the likely votes.

“The majority of undecideds usually go to the challenger, especially lesser-known challengers who later become better known,” Panagakis says. “It is reasonable to conclude that indecision must be an expression of doubt about the efficacy of the candidate the voters know best—the incumbent. . . In other words, there is overwhelming evidence suggesting that an incumbent won’t share the undecided vote equally with the challenger and that emphasizing point spreads in news reports of polls is misleading.”<sup>21</sup>

The race of candidates—although not a factor in the 1992 North Carolina elections—is another important issue to consider when polls show large numbers of undecided voters. Beyle, the UNCH professor, notes that some poll respondents apparently disguise or lie about their intended vote (or their actual vote, in exit polls) when a minority

candidate is involved in a major campaign. That tendency helps explain, he says, why the last poll in the 1990 U.S. Senate campaign in North Carolina showed black Democratic challenger Harvey Gantt with a four-point lead over white Republican incumbent Jesse Helms—even though Helms ended up winning the election by six points.<sup>22</sup> Another example Beyle cites is Virginia’s 1989 gubernatorial campaign, in which polls showed black Democratic candidate Wilder with a much wider lead than he ended up with in the final election results.<sup>23</sup>

“The key to this problem seems to be in those respondents or voters who do not want to indicate that they are voting ‘against’ the minority candidate, that is, might be considered being a racist,” Beyle says. “These shifts can obviously make the polling results very suspect in such races. In fact, the ‘working rule’ is that unless a minority candidate has more than a 10-point lead, the race is a toss-up.”

Such factors have led at least one major newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer*, to shy away from “horse-race” polls. *The Observer* stopped sponsoring such polls because they are “only a snapshot of a moment in time, and they are notoriously misleading,” says City Editor Rick Thames, who coordinated the newspaper’s 1992 election coverage. “We decided we’d use our resources for polls on topics we considered more important,” he says. “We wanted to find out what voters’ concerns were, and make sure the politicians addressed them. We ran very brief reports on polls that others conducted, but the only horse-race questions in our polls were designed for some other purpose. In the U.S. Senate race, for example, we asked people who they were for, along with a lot of questions about their concerns, in an effort to see what issues were most important to people who said they supported Lauch Faircloth or Terry Sanford.”

## Pollsters Face New Challenges

**P**olls for the 1994 and 1996 elections already are well underway. In states with major races in 1994, polling firms are asking voters to express their preferences in “trial heats” that pit incumbents against several possible challengers. Coker says such early polls can detect which incumbents might be most vulnerable and establish “benchmarks” of candidates’ popularity. “Six or eight months from now, we’ll be able to look back and

—continues on page 59

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**Table 2. Summary of Poll Results in the 1990-92 Campaign  
for Governor in North Carolina**

Date of Poll	Name of Pollster <sup>1</sup>	Candidate (Party)				
		Gardner (R)	Hunt (D)	Mavretic (I)	McLaughlin (L)	Undecided
2/7/90	M-D	31 %	52 %	—	—	17 %
2/4/91	M-D	29	51	—	—	20
7/26/91	M-D	33	50	—	—	17
2/5/92	M-D	34	44	8 %	—	14
4/26/92	M-D	33	50	—	—	17
6/22/92	KPC	31	53	—	—	16
7/17/92	M-D	35	56	—	—	9
8/21/92	M-D	38	51	—	—	11
9/27/92	IORC	36	54	—	—	10
10/2/92	M-D	39	51	—	—	10
10/16/92	DM	35	38	—	—	26
10/25/92	IORC	33	52	—	—	15
10/26/92	M-D	41	48	—	—	11
11/3/92	Exit Poll	44	53	—	3	—
<b>11/3/92</b>	<b>Election Result</b>	<b>43 %</b>	<b>53 %</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>4 %</b>	<b>—</b>

<sup>1</sup> **M-D = Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll**, based on telephone interviews of likely voters, with a 3.5-percent margin of error. Number of respondents by date were: 810 on Feb. 5; 832 on April 26; 834 on July 17; 803 on Aug. 21; 813 on Oct. 2; 818 on Oct. 26. Mason-Dixon polls conducted for the *News & Record* of Greensboro, the *Morning Star* of Wilmington, and television stations WFMY in Greensboro, WBTV in Charlotte, and WCTI in New Bern.

**KPC = KPC Research**, based on telephone interviews of 651 adults on June 22, with a 3.8-percent margin of error. Poll conducted for *The Charlotte Observer* and WSOC-TV in Charlotte. Unlike the other polls in this chart, KPC did not restrict its survey to likely voters. Undecided included respondents who were undecided, did not plan to vote at all, refused to answer the question, or planned to vote for someone other than the Republican or Democratic candidate.

**IORC = Independent Opinion Research and Communications**, based on telephone interviews of likely voters, with a 4-percent margin of error. Number of respondents by date were: 609 on Sept. 27 and 854 on Oct. 25. IORC polls were conducted for *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and Raleigh television station WRAL.

**DM = Dynamic Marketing**. Poll conducted on Oct. 16 for WSOC-TV in Charlotte, with a 5-percent margin of error. Number of respondents and methodology unknown.

**Exit Poll by Voter Research and Survey**, a cooperative effort for ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC television. Results as reported in "North Carolina Statewide Race Polls, 1992," *North Carolina DataNet*, Institute for Research in Social Sciences, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 1993.

**Election Results** are final tallies reported by the N.C. Board of Elections.

**Table 3. Summary of Poll Results in the 1990-92 Campaign for U.S. Senate in North Carolina**

Date of Poll	Name of Pollster <sup>1</sup>	Candidate (Party)		
		Lauch Faircloth (R)	Terry Sanford (D), incumbent	Undecided
7/26/91	M-D	24 %	51 %	25 %
2/5/92	M-D	30	51	19
4/26/92	M-D	38	47	15
6/22/92	KPC	33	50	18
7/17/92	M-D	31	55	14
8/21/92	M-D	36	50	14
9/27/92	IORC	39	45	16
10/2/92	M-D	34	48	18
10/16/92	DM	36	34	30
10/25/92	IORC	38	44	17
10/26/92	M-D	37	45	18
11/3/92	Exit Poll	50	50	—
11/3/92	Election Results	52 %	48 %	—

<sup>1</sup> **M-D = Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll**, based on telephone interviews of likely voters, with a 3.5-percent margin of error. Number of respondents by date were: 810 on Feb. 5; 832 on April 26; 834 on July 17; 803 on Aug. 21; 813 on Oct. 2; 818 on Oct. 26. Mason-Dixon polls conducted for the *News & Record* of Greensboro, the *Morning Star* of Wilmington, and television stations WFMY in Greensboro, WBTV in Charlotte, and WCTI in New Bern.

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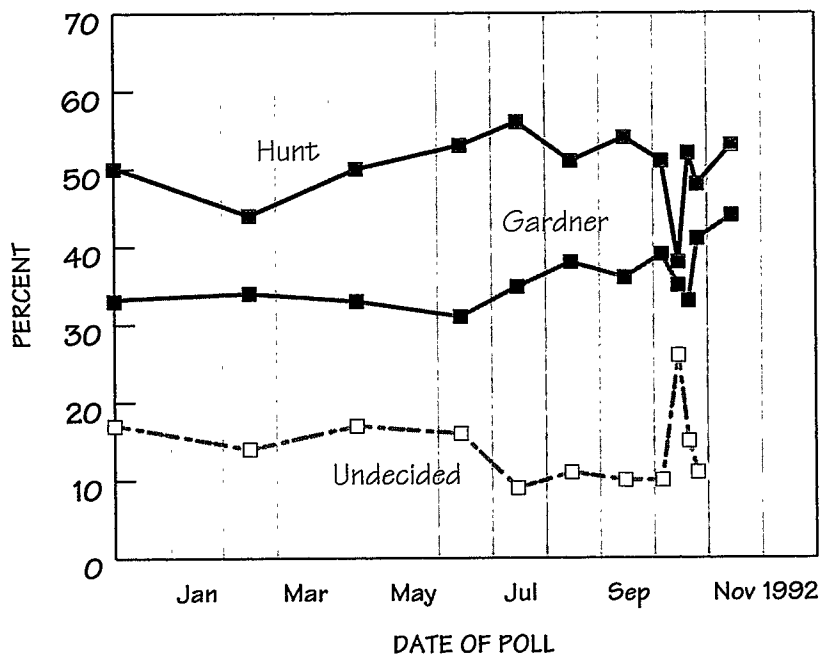
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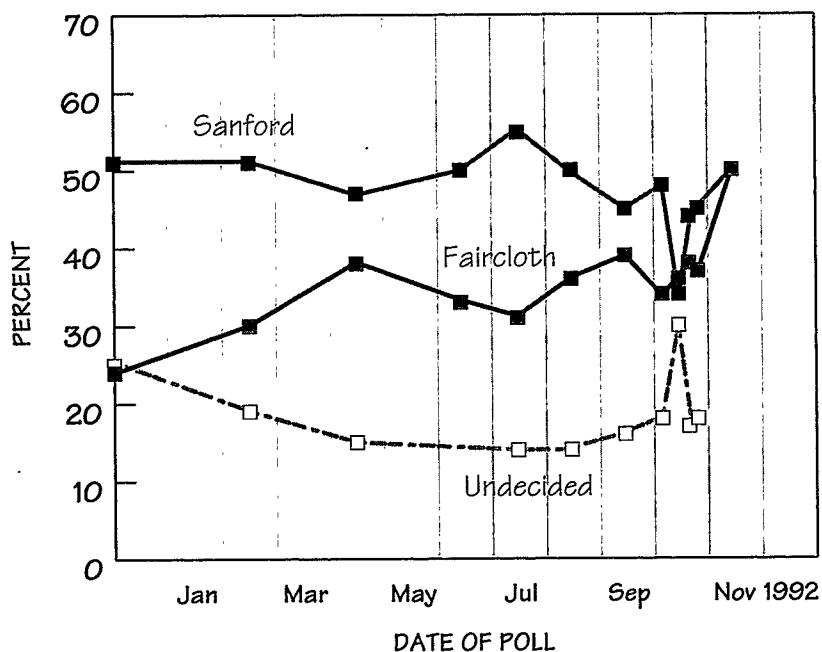
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**Figure 1. 1992 Poll Results for the Governor's Campaign<sup>1</sup>**



**Figure 2. 1992 Poll Results for the U.S. Senate Campaign<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>See Table 2, p. 56, for names of pollsters, specific dates, and other polling data.

<sup>2</sup>See Table 3, p. 57, for names of pollsters, specific dates, and other polling data.

say 'Mario Cuomo is here and six months ago he was there,'" Coker explains. That can help analysts determine which candidates have the most momentum.

But some pollsters say their job is getting harder. Bulluck more frequently is encountering people who refuse to participate in polls. "People are beginning to feel as though they are market-researched to death," she says. "It's not just politics. It's the subscriber poll that's in the newspaper or the card they fill out at the drugstore." Bulluck says polltakers must walk a fine line in dealing with such people on the telephone. While pollsters want to persuade people to participate in surveys, they run the risk of pushing them too hard. Angered by a pushy pollster, some people may react by deliberately misrepresenting their opinions.

Pollsters also are starting to be hampered by new technology, Bulluck says. Telephone features such as "call-blocking" allow people to accept messages only from selected numbers, while "caller ID" systems let them to see a caller's number before they answer the phone. Bulluck says people may use those features to avoid answering calls from pollsters or any other telephone numbers they don't recognize.

## Candidate Polls Differ From Media Polls

Some political activists specifically advise people not to cooperate with pollsters. The Center for National Independence in Politics, a nonpartisan group that works to improve the American political process, distributed brochures aimed at helping the public make informed choices on Election Day in 1992. It urged voters to consider refusing to participate in polls.<sup>24</sup>

Richard Kimball, the executive director of the Center, calls the polls taken by candidates "very manipulative." He says campaigns use polls to decide what positions candidates should take on controversial issues. "Candidates spend a great deal of their time raising money," Kimball says.

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INDEPENDENT OPINION RESEARCH AND  
COMMUNICATIONS

"Usually it's spent to hire somebody to do market analysis, to measure what the public wants to purchase, and then to tailor their image to fit what you now know will be sellable based on that analysis."

Kimball does not object to polls conducted by the news media or other organizations not connected with political candidates or campaigns. And he says polls can have some value after the election—even for politicians—to gauge con-

stituents' opinions on issues and help lawmakers decide how to vote on controversial legislation. "But during an election, that does not tend to be how they use the information," he says. "They use it to tailor their message to bamboozle the electorate, and they're becoming quite good at it."

That view is strongly rebutted by Harrison Hickman, who conducted polls for both the Hunt and Sanford campaigns. "The straw man he [Kimball] creates and attacks is an insult to our clients," Hickman says. "Terry Sanford and Jim Hunt had long and distinguished careers in public service before ever meeting me or any other pollster. Each had staked out positions on nearly every conceivable issue of public policy without any assistance from polls." Neither candidate uses poll results to shape their views on issues, Hickman says. "Rather, they are guided by personal values, beliefs, and conscience."<sup>25</sup>

Other critics say the biggest problem with opinion polls is money—or the lack of it. "Most polling errors are the result of incorrect decisions by clients who pay for polls done by inexperienced or 'low-bid' pollsters who provide inferior or incomplete work," writes Gordon S. Black, a national pollster whose clients include *USA Today*. "Unlike other professions where there is a significant liability for negligence or error, pollsters and their clients are protected by First Amendment rights from the consequences of their mistakes. Under these circumstances, why not hire the least expensive and least experienced?"<sup>26</sup>

Such problems could be undermining the credibility of polls. Indeed, some studies have found that a majority of people seriously question the

# Polling Checklist

Here are some points to consider when evaluating the merits of a poll:<sup>1</sup>

1. Who paid for or sponsored the poll.
2. Date when the poll was conducted and any events that might have influenced the results.
3. Method of interviewing poll respondents—by telephone, mail, or in person.
4. Population surveyed and screening questions, such as those used to identify likely voters.
5. Size of the sample and the response rate, when relevant.
6. Estimated sampling error.
7. Treatment of subgroups in the sampling process, such as under-representation of women or blacks.
8. The actual wording of poll questions.

<sup>1</sup> Polling checklist was adapted from recommendations of the National Council on Public Polls, an organization seeking high standards of professionalism among public opinion pollsters and greater understanding by the media, politicians and the general public. For a more thorough discussion, see J. Barlow Herget, "What to Look for in a Good Poll," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Oct. 1984), pp. 12-13.

accuracy of opinion polls. For instance, the Center for Government Studies at Northern Illinois University turned the tables on pollsters in a 1991 survey that asked respondents, "How often do you think you can trust the results of public opinion polls to represent what people think about important issues?" The results: 8 percent thought polls were "hardly ever" accurate, 46 percent said polls were right "only some of the time," 38 percent said polls were right "most of the time," and 6 percent said they were "almost always" right.<sup>27</sup>

## Polls Are Not Forecasts

**I**n conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that polls do not actually *predict* election outcomes. A poll only reflects how the electorate is

inclined to vote on a particular day. And that picture can change depending on such factors as survey methodology, sample size, wording of questions, the number of undecided voters, the time when the poll was conducted, and events that influence voters—as well as the actual voter turnout on Election Day. (See the "Polling Checklist" above.)

"Finally, a poll is not a forecast; it is just a snapshot view of things as they were at a given point in time," Black says. "Last-minute swings in electoral support can invalidate results of a poll completed eight to ten days before the election. The unforgettable late shift to Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential race took place in the final ten days of the campaign, after a Gallup poll predicting Tom Dewey's victory had been completed."<sup>28</sup> ■■■

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more information on political polling in North Carolina, see J. Barlow Herget, "Gauging the Political Winds," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Oct. 1984), pp. 2-13. Also see Mike McLaughlin, "'Visual Bubblegum'—Dial-In TV Polls Spark Debate Among Broadcasters," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Oct. 1988), pp. 63-67.

<sup>2</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll*, Mason-Dixon Political/Media Research Inc., February 1991, 828 respondents. All Mason-Dixon polls referred to in this story were based on telephone interviews of likely voters, with a 3.5-percent margin of error.

<sup>3</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll*, February 1990, 849 respondents.

<sup>4</sup> Libertarian candidate Scott McLaughlin also received 4 percent of the final gubernatorial vote.

<sup>5</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll*, February 1991.

<sup>6</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll*, July 1991, 834 respondents.

<sup>7</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll, Part II: Senate Race*, August 1992, 803 respondents.

<sup>8</sup> Although pollsters for Hunt and Gardner declined to release results of their internal polls, campaign officials were willing to discuss their general findings and trends. The Washington firm of Hickman-Brown conducted polls for both the Hunt and Sanford campaigns, while Fabrizio & McLaughlin of Alexandria, Va., conducted polls for both Gardner and Faircloth.

<sup>9</sup> Ferrel Guillory and Bill Krueger, "Hunt has solid lead, poll finds," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 30, 1992, p. 1A. Independent Opinion Research and Communications' poll was based on telephone interviews of 854 likely voters, with a 4-percent margin of error.

<sup>10</sup> At publication time, a federal grand jury was still looking into the eavesdropping allegations. However, on Oct. 26, 1993, Beverley Smith, the former Nash County Democratic Party chairman, pled guilty before a federal magistrate to charges that she had intentionally intercepted and monitored cellular phone calls between Gardner and members of his family during the 1992 campaign. On Nov. 10, 1993, two former law partners of Hunt also pled guilty in federal court to infractions for reviewing notes and a tape from Smith's eavesdropping. Those charged included former Supreme Court Justice Phil Carlton of Pinetops and Charlie Lane of Rocky Mount, both partners in the Poyner & Spruill law firm. In statements, both Carlton and Lane denied ever talking with Hunt about the eavesdropping or passing on information about it to the Hunt campaign. Hunt concurred. For more information, see Joseph Neff and Van Denton, "Hunt allies plead guilty," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Nov. 11, 1993, p. 1A; and The Associated Press, "Hawke wants eavesdropping probe to continue," *The News & Observer*, Oct. 27, 1993, p. 4A.

<sup>11</sup> *Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll, Part II: Senate Race*, November 1992, 818 respondents.

<sup>12</sup> Guillory and Krueger, p. 1A.

<sup>13</sup> See Bill Krueger, "Faircloth's in-state fund raising poses threat to Sanford," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 24, 1992, pp. 1A, 12A. *The News & Observer* reported that Faircloth had raised \$809,000 in campaign funds from in-state sources compared to Sanford's \$508,000 (through Sept. 30, 1993)—even though the incumbent Senator still led in overall fund-raising by \$1.7 million to \$1.4 million. According to the article, Sanford's fund-raising was considered poor for an incumbent senator, particularly in the early stages of his campaign, and backers worried that he wouldn't have enough money to counter negative television ads late in the race.

<sup>14</sup> Senator Sanford voted against two Republican-sponsored

"workfare" amendments. However, he voted for the 1988 Family Support Act, which increased welfare benefits but required able-bodied recipients to work or participate in education and training programs.

<sup>15</sup> See Krueger, p. 12A.

<sup>16</sup> Margins of error for the three major polls were: Mason-Dixon North Carolina Poll, 3.5 percent; KPC Research, 3.8 percent; and Independent Opinion Research and Communications, 4 percent.

<sup>17</sup> Seth Effron, "Poll has Faircloth gaining on Sanford," *News & Record*, Greensboro, N.C., Oct. 30, 1992, p. 1A.

<sup>18</sup> AP & staff reports, "Poll: Sanford with narrow lead," *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, Oct. 30, 1992, p. 2B.

<sup>19</sup> Rep. Mavretic dropped out of the race on June 25, 1992, after failing to qualify for a spot on the ballot. State law requires that 2 percent of the registered voters sign a petition for an independent candidate to qualify for the ballot, and Mavretic was unable to gather the required 70,543 signatures. For more details, see Rob Christensen, "Mavretic drops bid for governor," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., June 26, 1992, pp. 1B-2B.

<sup>20</sup> See Nick Panagakos, "Making sense out of poll stories," *Illinois Issues*, August & September 1987, pp. 74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74-75.

<sup>22</sup> According to results published in *The Hotline*, Vol. 7, No. 15 (Oct. 5, 1993), p. 2, Gantt led Helms by a 48-44 percent margin in the last poll before the 1990 election but lost by a 47-53 percent margin on Election Day.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* The final poll conducted before the 1989 election in Virginia showed Wilder with a 52 percent to 41 percent lead over Republican candidate Marshall Coleman, who is white. However, Wilder won the final election by a much closer margin, 50.2 percent to 49.8 percent.

<sup>24</sup> Center for National Independence in Politics, *The Voter's Self-Defense Manual*, Corvallis, Oregon, March 1992, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the varying impact of public polls on voters, activists, and the press, see Harrison Hickman, "Public Polls and Election Participants," in *Polling and Presidential Election Coverage*, Paul J. Lavrakas and Jack K. Holley, eds., Sage Publications, Newbury Park, Calif., 1991, pp. 100-133.

<sup>26</sup> See Gordon S. Black, "The Perot error," *Campaign Magazine*, June 1992, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> See Ellen M. Dran, "Public opinion on polling and pollsters," *Illinois Issues*, July 1992, pp. 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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—GORDON S. BLACK, NATIONAL POLLSTER