

# Polling the Pollsters on Polls

On June 18, six weeks after the first statewide primary in 1984, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research sent a two-page questionnaire to 16 political pollsters working in North Carolina (see page 6).<sup>\*</sup> Eleven of the 16 returned completed surveys; some of them requested that the information remain confidential. Several of those surveyed responded with two-to-three page letters amplifying their answers. We attempted to incorporate the thrust of such material in the main article and the sidebar on "what to look for

in a good poll." Below are the questions from the survey with aggregate responses, where such tabulation was possible.

The tabulations show first the *number of respondents* and then in parentheses the *percentage of the 11 respondents represented by this number*. Where questions allowed for checking more than one response, the number of responses will total more than 11 and the percentage more than 100.

## The Techniques of Polling

- |       |  |  |  |
|-------|--|--|--|
| 1. a. | In a typical <i>statewide</i> campaign poll, how many persons do you normally include in your sample size? | up to 600: 2 (18%)<br>up to 800: 3 (27%)   | up to 1,000: 3 (27%)<br>up to 1,200: 3 (27%) |
| b.    | What is your typical margin of error?  | 0 percent: 1 (10%)<br>3 to 4 percent: 5 (45%)<br>up to 5 percent: 5 (45%)  |  |
| 2. a. | How do you survey your respondents in such a poll? (Check appropriate spaces.)                             | Personal (in-the-home) interview 2 (18%)<br>Telephone 10 (91%)<br>Mail 1 ( 9%)<br>Combination (please specify) 0<br>Other (e.g., CATV) 0   |  |
| b.    | What are the strengths and weaknesses of various methods?  | Responses varied but most mentioned: "telephone" strong on turnaround time and cost; "personal interview" strong on detail but expensive, time consuming, and hard to monitor.   |  |
| 3.    | When you survey, do you sample opinion from:   | Computer generated lists (e.g., random digit dialing) 10 (91%)<br>Voter registration list 6 (55%) (2 of the 6: "very occasionally")<br>Telephone books 5 (45%) (1 of the 5: "very occasionally")<br>Registered voters in a particular party 5 (45%) (1 of the 5: "very occasionally")<br>Other (please specify) 1 ( 9%) ("Long System Method") |  |
| 4.    | What criteria do you use in screening respondents?   | Whether person is registered to vote 8 (73%)<br>Whether person is member of particular party 7 (64%)<br>Whether person voted in last comparable election 6 (55%)<br>Other (please specify)<br>Probability of voting 4 (36%)<br>No screening (all adults) 1 ( 9%)<br>"Long System Method" 1 ( 9%)   |  |
| 5.    | What type of polling questions do you prefer?  | Closed question with multiple choice answers 3 (27%)<br>Open-ended questions 2 (18%)<br>Both 10 (91%)  |  |
| 6.    | Do you supplement your polling with research on "focus groups" (women, minorities, etc.)?                  | No 7 (64%)<br>Yes 3 (27%)<br>Sometimes 1 ( 9%)   |  |

<sup>\*</sup>Two of the 18 listed on page 6, Yevonne Brannon and the N.C. Citizens Survey, do not poll on political races but only on general topics. Hence, neither of these received a questionnaire.

7. Which characteristics do you consider most vital to an accurate political poll? Please rank the choices below in order of importance (#1 is first):	Population surveyed	1.6
	Wording of questions	2.0
	Interview method (telephone, etc.)	2.5
	Size of sample	2.9

Ed. Note: For each of the four choices, the respondents' rankings were added together and divided by 11. This provides an average ranking for each choice. The lower the number, the higher the ranking.

### Clients

8. Who are your clients?	Corporations (includes media)	11 (100%)	Political parties	3 ( 27%)
	Political candidates	8 ( 73%)	Others (please specify)	
	Associations	7 ( 64%)	School board	1 ( 9%)
	Agencies	4 ( 36%)	Office holders	1 ( 9%)
			Ad hoc committees	1 ( 9%)

9. a. Do you work only with:		b. Do you work only with:	
Democratic candidates	3 (27%)	Moderate candidates	4 (36%)
Republican candidates	1 ( 9%)	Liberal candidates	3 (27%)
No preference	3 (27%)	Conservative candidates	2 (18%)
Not applicable	4 (36%)	No preference	3 (27%)
		Not applicable	4 (36%)

10. How many candidates do you normally work for in a year?	None	3 (27%)	15-30	1 (9%)
	1-4	3 (27%)	100+	1 (9%)
	5-10	2 (18%)	Confidential	1 (9%)

11. Do you do polling on issues as well as for individual candidates?	Yes	10 (91%)		
	No	1 ( 9%)		
If yes, do you do polling for (percentages for pool of 10 respondents):	Interest groups or associations		9	(90%)
	Initiatives		8	(80%)
	Referenda		7	(70%)

12. What types of campaigns do you do polling for most often?	U.S. Senate	8 (73%)	Initiatives and referenda	6 (55%)
	Congress	7 (64%)	Other statewide offices	5 (45%)
	Governor	6 (55%)	State legislative races	4 (36%)
	Lt. Governor	6 (55%)	Local races	4 (36%)
Which of these campaigns do you most prefer?	Governor	4 (36%)		
Campaigns mentioned:	U.S. Senate	3 (27%)		
	Initiatives and Referenda	2 (18%)		
	Statewide	1 ( 9%)		
	Local	1 ( 9%)		
	No preference	5 (45%)		

### Budget

13. How do you charge for your polling services to candidates?	Flat rate fee	7 (64%)	Not applicable	2 (18%)
	Reimbursement for costs and personal expenses	3 (27%)	Commission	1 ( 9%)
			Confidential	1 ( 9%)

For flat rate fee responses: (7 responses)	% of normal campaign budget		average budget for statewide campaign	
5%		1	\$5,000 to \$10,000	1
7 to 8%		1	\$10,000 to \$25,000	1
6 to 11%		1	\$100,000	2
No response		4	No response	3

14. What would be a reasonable cost per poll if you were the pollster for a candidate for governor of North Carolina in 1984?	Reported (in \$1000s)	First Primary	Runoff Primary	General Election
	\$6 to 10	3 (27%)	3 (27%)	3 (27%)
	\$15 to 20	2 (18%)	1 ( 9%)	2 ( 9%)
	\$30 to 33	0	2 (18%)	0
	\$72 to 87	1 ( 9%)	0	1 ( 9%)
	Varies	2 (18%)	2 (18%)	2 (18%)
	No response	3 (27%)	3 (27%)	3 (27%)
	Total			
	Respondents:	11	11	11

Ed. Note: Responses varied significantly, primarily because of the difference in clients (especially candidates vs. newspapers).

# What to Look for in a Good Poll

by J. Barlow Herget

This fall, the public will be inundated by polling results on the presidential, U.S. Senate, congressional, gubernatorial, and other statewide and local races. At the same time, editors and reporters will be faced with constant decisions in analyzing polling data—reliability, timing of releasing results, and “making news” with polling results versus “reporting news.”

What should a journalist look for in a good poll? And how should a thoughtful citizen look behind the headlines and the gross percentage figures that make up the “horse race” factor in elections?

The National Council on Public Polls publishes guidelines for its members and political reporters. The council considers it essential that seven types of data, discussed below, accompany news stories on polls. To apply these seven criteria specifically to races in North Carolina, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research mailed a questionnaire about the science and practice of polling to 16 of the organizations/individuals listed on page 6.\* Eleven of these 16 completed and returned the survey.

The discussion below is based on the National Council on Public Polls guidelines, interviews with the leading pollsters working in North Carolina, and the results of the N.C. Center’s questionnaire (see page 10 for full results). A poll that doesn’t provide information on each of these seven criteria could be considered suspect. Yet even with such guidelines, infinite numbers of variables exist that can skew a survey, as the pollsters themselves testify.

\*Two of the 18 listed on page 6, Yevonne Brannon and the N.C. Citizens Survey, do not poll on political races but only on general topics. Hence, neither of these received a questionnaire.

## Polling Checklist

If you are a journalist, a news release on a candidate’s latest poll might cross your desk near your deadline. Of if you are a concerned voter, you might have to rush through a news account on a recent political poll. If so, maybe the checklist below will help.

Always report (if you are a journalist) or look for (if you are a concerned voter) the following seven points:

1. who paid for the poll;
2. when the polling was done and any events that might have affected the poll results at that time;
3. how the poll was taken—by telephone, mail, or in-person;
4. the population surveyed and screening questions—registered voters, members of a particular party, voters in the last comparable election, and/or persons likely to vote in the upcoming election;
5. the size of the sample (which should be at least 600 for a statewide poll in North Carolina);
6. the treatment of sub-groups in the sampling process—e.g., underrepresentation of women or blacks;
7. the actual wording of the poll’s questions and whether the wording was as neutral as possible.

**1. Who sponsored the poll?** A good news report will do more than just name the polling operation. It should also make clear who paid for the poll—a specific candidate, the newspaper reporting the poll, or some other organization. This helps the reader judge the degree of possible bias and news “generation.” A reporter should also provide some background information on the philosophy and technique of the particular pollster. The chart on page 6 and the accom-

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### Roles in Campaign and Other

15. What roles do you normally serve in a campaign in addition to doing polling?

Ed. Note: 4 of the 11 said “not applicable” or “none”; the responses listed come from the other 7 respondents.

Setting basic campaign strategy	7 (64%)
Selection of campaign issues	7 (64%)
Producing TV/media ads	3 (27%)
Conducting direct mail fundraising	1 ( 9%)
Other: General counsel	1 ( 9%)
Media strategy (debates, etc.)	1 ( 9%)

16. Have you ever worked with a candidate after s/he is elected?

Ed. Note: Of the 11 respondents, 2 said “not applicable,” 2 said “no,” and 1 said “confidential”; the responses listed come from the other 6 respondents.

Have done polling for an elected official	6 (55%)
Have done policy analysis	5 (45%)
Worked under contract with state agency	2 (18%)