

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-

Polling the Pollsters, continued

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%)

panying article (for the "Big Four" in North Carolina) provide such information. A poll done for a news agency is not necessarily more free from bias than a poll done for a candidate.

2. When was the polling done? The timing of a poll can affect the results. A candidate, for example, may take a poll immediately *after* a big media blitz, and then try to show high standing in the polls. The percentage points might fall, however, after the immediate impact of the ad campaign fades. Similarly, if a candidate has just made a major public mistake—or a major coup—his or her standing could shoot down (or up) for a short period before settling out again.

The media not only have a responsibility to caution readers about when polls were taken but also should examine the timing when they report on poll results. Campaigns, quite naturally, release the results most advantageous to their position. Are there poll results that campaigns do not release? Why? Patterns of *when* campaigns release poll results make good story material for industrious reporters. News releases on the latest poll might well be pure propaganda.

3. How were the interviews conducted—by telephone, mail, or in-person? The major pollsters disagree on the best interview method. Walter DeVries considers mail surveys unwieldy and an anachronism while Bill Long lives by them. Michael Carmichael, the coordinator of polls for Rufus Edmisten during the primary season, puts considerable faith in pollster Joe Napolitan's in-person interviews but concedes they are the most expensive.

Expense is the most important reason that the telephone poll has become the industry standard. Using telephones, a "baseline" interview will last usually 30 minutes, a "tracking" poll is much shorter (see pages 5 and 7 of main article for discussion on these terms).

Charlotte pollster Brad Hayes offers some street wisdom on the subject. "You have some quality control with telephone interviews and you don't worry about the 'bad dog theory' or the 'curb syndrome'."

"The bad dog theory and curb syndrome?" we asked.

"Yeah, that's when your interviewer skips a designated house because there's a bad dog on the front porch or you get bad data because the interviewer, tired after a hot morning, sits on the curb and fills out the forms himself."

DeVries, Hayes, and North Carolina pollster Phil Meyer also believe people are more willing to tell an emotionless voice over the phone the truth about private thoughts than reveal so much to a real live breathing person sitting across from them in the living room. As for missing those people who do not have telephones—nine percent of the households in North Carolina don't—most pollsters dismiss the worry by saying those persons are also the least likely to vote. Random digit dialing, the system employed by many pollsters, picks up unlisted numbers.

4. What population was surveyed? The science of random sampling has become much more sophisticated in recent years. The process of selecting interviewees and compiling their responses has vastly improved through the use of computers. Still, pollsters make critical judgments in whether and how they "screen" respondents. Specifically, does the pollster screen whether the respondents are registered voters, members of a particular party, voters in the last comparable election, and likely to vote in the upcoming election?

Reporters need to know the philosophy of the major pollsters on screening and may need to probe any twists in the screening of a specific poll (the main article covers this ground for the "Big Four"). In addition, pointing out the difficulties of proper screening is valuable.

For example, how do you know if respondents are registered voters? You ask them and hope they don't lie. To test whether respondents are indeed telling the truth, most surveys use a battery of screening questions to see if the interviewee is in fact a registered voter and more importantly,

a likely voter. Reporters and the electorate need to know the quality of screening questions in a particular survey. Without such analysis, accepting a poll's results is blind faith.

5. What is the size of the sample? As discussed in the main article, the major pollsters use varying sizes for a statewide poll in North Carolina. Most actually survey from 800 to 1,200, but many base their results on only a portion of the total sample. In other words, some pollsters screen out some of the responses.

Thus, reporting on the sample size is important, but not enough. In general numbers, pollsters agree that for a state the size of North Carolina, the results must be based on at least 600 respondents in order to give accurate data with a margin of error of 3-5 percent. But go one step further. How did the pollster decide on these 600 respondents?

6. How big are the sub-groups in the sample? The respondents must represent an accurate demographic spread among the respondents. Various segments of the population—by sex, race, age, urban/rural, location, etc.—should be represented approximately according to their percentage of registered voters. Are important sub-groups, such as blacks and women, underrepresented? In a poll of 600 people, if there are three too few blacks, the survey could miss a lot of black voters. Also, pollsters have difficulty in figuring voter sentiment when groups such as blacks tend to vote in blocs, sometimes for surprised candidates who are selected by a black voter organization the night before election day.

Pollsters working under contract for particular candidates are beginning to add special "focus-group" research to traditional polls. Walter DeVries, for example, did such work for the Knox-for-Governor campaign.

A polling analyst needs to dig for percentages on the sub-groups—the number in the total sample and results based only on specific sub-groups. With such information, the poll becomes much more meaningful.

7. How are the questions worded? After all the scientific issues are probed—sample size, sub-groups, timing, etc.—the most important issue of all remains fuzzy at best. The science of how to word questions has not even begun to achieve the sophistication of the sampling process, says Duke University professor John McConahay. McConahay has worked for Jeffrey MacDonald, John DeLorean, and other defendants in major trials to help reveal through polling methods how prospective jurors might feel—possible biases, etc. "The science of sampling is very advanced, and very expensive," says McConahay. "But asking the right questions is not at all advanced. It remains the soft part of polling."

No one has a fixed proven formula other than common sense objectivity. The timing of a key question can also alter the response. For example, if the interviewer early on pops the big question—"If the election were held today, would you vote for X or Y?"—the respondent is less likely to be decisive than if he or she first has a chance to answer other questions on issues and likes/dislikes.

Questions might also shape opinions that a person never knew she or he had. A poll, for example, could ask, "Do you think education is the most important issue facing candidates for governor?" A respondent might have never thought that to be the case until answering "yes." Hence, the question itself tends to reinforce the biases of the poll's designer.

Most questions ask respondents to select a choice within a range of possible responses. If for instance, a pollster is screening for registered voters, he might ask you to respond on a scale from one to five of your intention of voting in November.

The wording of questions, perhaps more than any of the other six criteria discussed above, demands close scrutiny by the media, and in turn the public. The nature of the survey questions—i.e., the judgments and biases behind the choice of words—can make one a believer in or a skeptic of any poll. □