Ethics and the New Style Candidate Pollster

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Everywhere the American public turns, it seems to find itself explained by one sort of poll or another. For many years George Gallup and Louis Harris have been selling their surveys to newspapers. Now every newspaper and television station seems to have its own survey on every subject. Then there are the Nielsen ratings to tell us what we watch on television, market research to tell business what we will buy, the wire service polls to tell us who the best college football team is, a poll of historians to tell us which Presidents succeeded and which failed, while everyone seems to be taking a poll to let us know who we want as our next President, even if we have just finished electing the last one. So flooded are we with polls that it is easy to forget that polling is a very recent phenomenon. Truly systematic political polls are only about fifty years old. Polls taken for political candidates did not come into significant use until the 1940's and have only become an important part of most campaigns in the last twenty years. Typically a candidate would hire a polling firm to take and analyze surveys. Most polling reports consisted of the presentation of simple trial heat results together with cross-tabulations concerning key groups and major issues, with occasional panel studies. When the campaign ended, the pollster would return to his other clients while the candidate, win or lose, would not be likely to consult professionally with the pollster until the next campaign.

Since then, the role of those who take polls for candidates has changed dramatically. Because of the difficulty of obtaining full and honest information about the internal workings of political campaigns, the significance of these changes has been largely ignored. This article examines these changes and their implications, including a number of possible dangers caused by the changed role of private campaign pollsters.

The most important change has been the growth in the importance of both the polls and the poll takers. In 1968, $6 million was spent by candidates for 1200 polls. In 1980, the two major party presidential candidates each spent more than a million dollars, with a total spent by all candidates for office of approximately $20 million for 2000 polls.

There are several reasons for this increase. Some is due to the inflation that has increased all campaign costs. The rest is caused by changes in campaigns and polls. The modern campaign has created a need for the type of information provided by polls. On the presidential level, there has been a sharp increase in the number of important primaries, requiring candidates to have knowledge of an intricate set of rules. As a result, each candidate has more choices to make, increasing the need for reliable and detailed information. On all levels, increased reliance on television has caused candidates to utilize polls to develop and refine their strategy. Most candidates,
rather than depending on the party, put together their own campaign staff, often relying on a hired campaign consultant. One of their first acts is to take a poll to help determine strategy. In 1980, when John Connally sought to recruit Lee Atwater to manage his South Carolina primary effort, the latter, after studying thirteen state polls, decided that Connally’s large negatives (only 26% viewed him positively compared to 37% who had negative views) meant certain defeat so he declined the offer.5 Lowell Weicker announced his presidential candidacy in March 1979 but withdrew only two months later, citing a poll which showed him trailing Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, but ahead of four other contenders, in his home state of Connecticut.6 Since Ford was never to become a candidate, this appears, in retrospect, not to have been as serious as Weicker claimed but the weak poll results had negative effects on fund raising and press coverage. For the more successful efforts of Reagan and Carter, as will be discussed later, strategy memos were drawn up by the pollsters themselves.

Also adding to the cost of polls has been their increasingly sophisticated methodology. Instead of the simple trial heats and cross-tabs, there is now considerable use of more complex statistical methods such as multidimensional scaling.7 Also common is the daily tracking survey, used by both Carter and Reagan to measure progress. Even the questioning has become more sophisticated. Instead of simply asking people how they intended to vote, Patrick Caddell, Jimmy Carter’s pollster, followed up by asking a series of specific questions so as to make the respondent think more seriously about his vote (as he would on primary or election day). When a second candidate choice question was then posed, the result was often a changed response. These second response figures revealed potential dangers and opportunities hidden by simple trial heat polls. During the New Hampshire primary, while published polls showed a large Carter lead, the adjusted totals indicated that Senator Kennedy was closing the gap. Potential Kennedy voters admired the Camp David agreement but had let it fade from memory. As a result of these findings, new advertisements emphasized the achievement of Camp David. The adjusted figures then shifted to a 49–38% margin for Carter, virtually identical to the actual vote. In the later New York and Pennsylvania primaries, Caddell’s adjusted figures also indicated that large Carter leads in the public polls were melting away but changes in campaign strategy did not prevent Kennedy from winning both primaries.8

Few candidates can afford the full range of services. Because they are not experts in polling techniques, they must rely on the pollster to decide what to sacrifice in accuracy in order to keep down costs, making the decision about which pollster to hire a crucial one. According to Charles Roll and Albert Cantril, political candidates are poorly equipped to make this decision intelligently. “Candidates are almost always impressed by the previous clients a polling firm has worked for. Flattery and inside dopesterism often pique a candidate’s interest. Also, cost considerations are frequently decisive. In the research profession, while there are rare excep-
tions, the best salesmen do not make the best researchers and the best researchers are poor salesmen." Since the pollster must make a number of important decisions—whom to interview, whether (and how) to adjust the results, what size the sample should be, how to phrase the questions, what alternatives to ask about, and the order of the questions—as well as being responsible for the interpretation of the data, he has considerable influence within the campaign.

The most significant change, however, has been in the role of the pollster. At first, the pollster was essentially a consultant who was hired to take surveys, provide analysis, and leave the rest to the campaign staff. This first changed during John Kennedy’s 1960 presidential campaign. Louis Harris was not only his pollster but also an important campaign adviser. After the election, he stayed on as an adviser to President Kennedy. However, differences between Harris and other advisers, which had begun during the campaign, soon led to Harris’ return to private life. He has since left candidate polling entirely and is now a leading public pollster.

In today’s campaigns, the pollster has more influence than Harris could have dreamed of in 1960. In the most successful recent presidential campaigns, the pollsters have been members of the inner circle of advisers. This is well illustrated by Richard Wirthlin and Patrick Caddell. When Ronald Reagan fired campaign manager John Sears after the New Hampshire primary, pollster Wirthlin became his chief strategist. An indication of his importance is the fact that he, along with Sears’ successor William Casey and Edwin Meese, represented Reagan in the unsuccessful negotiations to persuade Gerald Ford to accept the vice-presidential nomination. After the convention, Wirthlin was put in charge of writing Reagan’s campaign plan. He produced a 100 page report outlining twenty-one “conditions of victory,” later reduced to a simpler seven. During the general election campaign he sent a series of memoranda on the major issues to Reagan’s other top advisers.

Carter’s pollster, Patrick Caddell, played a similar role in both 1976 and 1980. In late June 1980, he wrote a “first cut at a general election strategy.” Because he had little polling data except for the recent primary states, Caddell went far beyond the pollster’s role, admitting that “much of this memorandum is based on hunch, experience, and theory.” Like Wirthlin, he wrote a series of memos suggesting strategy for the campaign.

When their candidates succeeded, both Caddell and Wirthlin continued to provide advice. During the Carter administration, Caddell often advised the President although he was never officially a member of the White House staff. Wirthlin has been even more active since Reagan was elected. The Republican National Committee hired his firm to conduct surveys both for it and the White House, for a yearly fee of nearly a million dollars. According to Wirthlin, these polls influenced such decisions as President Reagan’s televised suggestion to the public to write to members of Congress urging support for his economic program, his deemphasis of the El Salvador issue,
and his retreat from proposals to reduce Social Security benefits.\textsuperscript{13}

The multiple roles of the new style pollster create a series of potential conflicts of interest that may prove harmful to the political process. The remainder of this article will discuss these conflicts and suggest possible remedies.

Pollster Mervin Field believes that combining the roles of researcher and political decision-maker results in a weakened performance in both for two reasons. First, because “good research methodologists are not necessarily good policy-makers and vice-versa.” Second, because “Political campaigns are intense pressure cookers. A person who is both a researcher and a counselor during a political campaign usually finds the research component of this hybrid combination the first to be impaired.”\textsuperscript{14}

Pollsters generally have political experience that is limited to campaigning rather than governing. Their experience is in the measurement and analysis of opinion, not in the substance of policy. It is therefore not surprising to see them advising candidates and office-holders to concentrate on image and public relations rather than substance. Shortly before Jimmy Carter’s inauguration, Caddell sent him a memo urging him to stress style over substance. “Too many good people have been beaten because they tried to substitute substance for style,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{15} Late in Carter’s term, the President delivered a “crisis of confidence” speech at Caddell’s urging, rejecting Vice-President Mondale’s view that Caddell’s memo was “crazy”, and that the country needed a statement about energy and the economy, not a lecture.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, in a campaign memo, Wirthlin discussed how to reconcile differences between Ronald Reagan’s views and those of the public. Reagan has won the nomination “not” because his ideological positions were congruent with the electorate, but rather in spite of a rather substantial ideological gap between himself and the average Republican.” Wirthlin sought to close this gap not by discussing policy but “by rounding out the total perception of Ronald Reagan as a more human, warm, approachable individual.”\textsuperscript{17}

Treating problems of substance as merely problems of image can result in poor public policy. A candidate may convince the public that his program is worth a try but once in office he will be judged by results. No matter how effectively a program is sold, if public support is to be maintained, it must be worth selling.

The multiple roles of the pollster—“objective” data collector and analyst, campaign adviser, post-election adviser, and poll talker for other clients—produce a real conflict of interest. In the past, when a pollster was simply hired to take and analyze surveys, he could do so with little conflict of interest because he was not really part of the campaign organization. He did have some stake in the outcome since the success of the candidate he worked for could enhance his reputation, thereby improving his business. Now that the pollster is an important staff member, the temptations for him to be less objective are far greater.
The traditional view is that the election will force him to be objective. As pollster Peter Hart puts it, "In political polling, impartiality means that you have not tried to load up favorable things for your candidate. If we deliver good news to our clients and it is not accurate, we are out of business." This theory is far too naive to fit the reality of political campaigns. A lack of objectivity or professionalism may actually help a candidate get elected.

This paradox is explained by the fact that polls are not taken simply to inform the candidate. Polls are frequently leaked for tactical reasons—to help raise funds, to mislead or discourage opponents and their supporters, or to influence press coverage. An extreme example occurred during one Senate campaign when a polling firm, anxious to get a candidate's business, offered to produce two surveys—a legitimate one for use by the candidate and a more favorable one to be leaked to the press and possible contributors. What obligation does the poll taker have if his client leaks partial poll results that are false or misleading? In 1979, the National Council on Public Polls, a voluntary association of leading polling organizations, adopted a code requiring private pollsters to release the sponsorship, interview dates, method of interviewing, population sampled, size of the sample and sub-samples, complete question wording, and exact percentages used in analysis whenever the pollster or client releases partial results. This leaves release to the discretion of the polling firm, especially if the leak is attributed in a news report as coming from an anonymous source. How many pollsters will be willing to antagonize current and future clients by sabotaging their strategic leaks? What if the pollster is part of the campaign staff that decided to leak or, worse yet, if himself the leaker? Since the Council is a voluntary organization, it can do little to enforce its regulations, especially against non-members. In fact, Caddell's firm, Cambridge Survey Research, resigned from the Council, claiming that the new rules would violate contracts with corporate clients. According to John Gorman, the firm's treasurer, "We're not happy to get into the role of policing our clients."

Polls may also be taken in order to influence the public. Members of Congress mail hundreds of thousands of questionnaires to their constituents. Although most professionals scoff at them, such "polls" make voters feel that their views are listened to by their representatives who can also use the results to justify votes that agree with the results. Even the leading pollsters are not above such tactics, as illustrated by the following question taken from the 1982 Ohio gubernatorial primary. Polls taken for William Brown asked:

As you may know, in 1974 (Jerry Springer), who had gotten married six months earlier, was arrested on a morals charge with three women in a hotel room. He also used a bad check to pay for the women's services, and subsequently resigned as Mayor of his city. Does this make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to support (him) for governor this year?
Such a loaded question would not even be considered by a pollster interested in accurately measuring public opinion but could be used to affect the vote of those questioned. Furthermore, the question contained numerous inaccuracies—Springer was not arrested, only one woman was involved, the incident occurred before he was elected Mayor and was public knowledge before his election to that office, the check did not bounce, the incident took place in a health club not a hotel, and he was married 18 months not six. This poll was not done by some fly-by-night pollster but by the firm of Patrick Caddell who, in a later interview, accepted the blame.

A pollster who is an adviser may also find himself tempted to tailor his poll taking to support his advice. Every campaign has disagreements among advisers over strategy. Since even slight alterations in wording can affect survey results, a pollster may, consciously or not, draw up questions or samples to back up his own positions. The apparent objectivity of numbers can make it hard to argue with them, especially against the campaign’s chief expert on the subject.

Finally, it must be remembered that most pollsters have other clients, including private corporations and foreign governments. In fact, special interests are probably the largest single customers for polling firms. Caddell’s clients have included, in addition to numerous candidates, Con Edison, Exxon, Westinghouse, and Sears. For members of the White House staff, similar involvement could violate conflict of interest laws, but pollster-advisers are not government employees so these laws do not apply to them.

Many interest groups now hire pollsters themselves and turn the results over to candidates, a procedure which enables them to increase the value of their contributions allowed by law. For example, AMPAC, representing the American Medical Association, spent $381,000 for polls in 36 congressional districts which they then donated to candidates. Unlike a candidate, an interest group does not benefit simply from winning an election. Unless a candidate supports their positions, his victory will not help them. Interest groups therefore have a real incentive, no matter how objective their other questions may be, to stack questions on the issues of concern to them to reach a predetermined result or to interpret results in favor of their position. Robert Cameron Mitchell cites a December 1979 Washington Post advertisement placed by the American Nuclear Energy Council as one which deliberately exaggerated the support for nuclear power shown in a poll they commissioned. Since polls donated to candidates are rarely made public, the extent of biased polls or misinterpretations can only be surmised.

Is there anything that can be done to prevent or lessen these abuses? Possible reforms include the following:

1. Voluntary measures. We have already discussed the efforts of the National Council on Public Polls to encourage full and accurate disclosure of polls. Developing a more comprehensive code by the Council and other associations of pollsters is one approach but its disadvantages were also
pointed out. This approach was taken by the American Association of Political Consultants in 1975 with little impact. According to Larry Sabato, "Most of the AAPC code is too generalized and vague to be enforceable, but some clauses potentially could be if the will to do so were there. Although the code provides for an investigating mechanism (clause 16), it has not once been invoked, nor is it likely to be." There is little reason to expect pollsters to have better results than consultants, especially since some consultants are also pollsters.

2. Disclosure. A second possibility is to require more complete disclosure by pollsters. The simplest method would require all pollsters working for candidates to register with the Federal Elections Commission (or equivalent state agency for state elections) and include such data as a list of clients and fees. In this way, the press and opposing candidates could make an issue of any conflicts of interest. Another approach would be to require all polls taken for candidates to be deposited in a central archive shortly after the election. The press and academics could then publicize shortcomings (as well as good points) of particular polls and pollsters. An additional advantage of this approach is that it would provide the information needed for adding to the very small number of studies of private political polling.

Either approach would require a more thorough knowledge of polls than most reporters currently have. However, many newspapers are giving reporters more training or, as is the case with the Washington Post, hiring their own in-house pollsters to cover public opinion and polling stories.

3. Pollster accreditation. Pollsters could be accredited by an impartial board. Even if accreditation were voluntary, accredited pollsters would possess an advantage in attracting clients. A code of ethics could then be drawn up which accredited pollsters would have to pledge to abide by. Complaints against pollsters would be investigated by the board. Justified complaints could result in public censure or a loss of accreditation.

This approach raises a number of difficult administrative problems. Would the board be a private or a government agency? Who would serve on it and how would they be selected? What standards would be used for accreditation?

Modern technology has revolutionized the political campaign. If we do not give serious thought to the dangers posed, we will have only ourselves to blame for the consequences.
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A useful short history of polls can be found in Charles W. Roll and Albert Cantril, *Polls: Their Use and Misuse in Politics*, (Cabin John, Md.: Seven Locks Press, 1980), pp. 5–11. I have examined the pollster’s role in several presidential campaigns in *Keeping a Finger on the Public Pulse: Private Polling and Presidential Elections*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982). Unless otherwise noted, references to the uses of polls in past presidential campaigns are drawn from this book.


Roll and Cantril, p. 156.

For more details see Altschuler, p. 82 and the sources cited there.


*Portrait of an Election*, p. 356.

Cantril, p. 64.

For more discussion of leaks and ethics see Altschuler pp. 175–178.


Cantril p. 10.


Cantril, pp. 88–92.

Sabato, p. 306.