
Strategic Polling for Politicians

by Richard Dresner

Much has been written on various aspects of the public opinion polling that finds its way into the headlines of daily newspapers and television. But less is known about the kind of private polling done for political candidates. This article sheds some light on this facet of electoral politics.

There are certain distinctions between public opinion polling and strategic polling for politicians. For many years I was a public opinion pollster. I did work for ABC, for Louis Harris, and for various government departments. The purpose of such polling is to compile "objective" information about what people are thinking about a specific topic. Then I became more of a political junkie and began to work as a strategist for political candidates.

When I run a poll it is to discover what should be in the commercial or the direct mail or the speech. We are not concerned as much about objectivity as we are about winning and of course, we do not make our polls public since that would reveal our strategy.

As candidate pollsters we do not ask people what is the number one issue facing the country. If we are any good, we know that already. We are hired to put together commercials, to do direct mailing and to advise on what

messages are having the most effect in a campaign. We try to find out what issues our opponents are going to bring to the campaign and what issues we should bring.

We give people a list of ten or twelve items and ask which of these would influence their vote. (We do the same thing in jury selection work. We present several versions of the same case to prospective jurors and by asking five or six questions we determine which is the strongest and most likely to influence a group of jurors)

When I worked for Tom Foley, former Speaker of the House of Representatives he said: "Everyone tells me I am going to lose my seat. I am not hiring you to tell me that." Everyone agreed that he did not vote with his district. In fact, he voted against them on everything. He said: "Your job is to find an area where I have something in common with my constituency." We discovered that he did not care about gun control and he became a quick member of the National Rifle Association Hall of Fame. That is what saved his seat in the 1978 election. It was the NRA sending out letters to conservative voters, saying do not believe Tom Foley is a liberal, we support him, so that means he is a conservative. He used polling to find the one area where he would have something in common with conservatives in his district.

Candidate polls are now fairly universal since in most countries the voters are looking for someone who actually agrees with them, or is going to do something they like. What strategic polling does is explain to the candidate or the party exactly where the common ground is, and what the best common language might be. So if you are a candidate or a party, hopefully you are doing polling that is extremely detailed.

Everybody knows that in the last US election, American voters were concerned about taxes. You do not have to poll to find out that people care about taxes. What

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you use polling for is to determine how they react to a proposal to reduce taxes by fifteen percent. Is this believable or not? I guess Bob Dole did not pay enough attention to his internal polling and neither did his campaign people. The Clinton administration polled every day and polled every conceivable topic and theme even the notion of a "bridge for the 21st century". They came up with five or six lines, and they ran with them.

When I worked for Boris Yeltsin, we took some of his endless speeches and played them before small audiences to find out what would be popular and what would not. In between being comatose, the audiences would respond every so often to a line. We literally copied that line and then tested it in surveys. We then went back to President Yeltsin and his campaign and said, "You say X,Y and Z." The people really liked X, so it would be great if you would repeat it." So the polling was very detailed and very task-oriented.

A question that came up in Russia was "what role should the wife and daughter play publicly." We had a list of 10 or 15 different things they might do. We tested each and everyone of them. Then the election team took it back to the campaign and said here are the 2 or 3 things Mrs. Yeltsin ought to be involved with. It was no accident that she set up charitable organisations. It was no accident that she talked about home life almost from the perspective of an average housewife. Russians saw her that way. But everyone knows, she is no average housewife.

Another issue with simulated polling is about those evil "push questions". I do not know why anyone would consider them evil. What they basically do is say to voters if you learned that candidate X was for the death penalty and candidate Y was against who would you vote for. People will tell you whether they will switch their votes based on those things. Again you go back to the campaign and say "if we use this issue, it is going to mean a lot of votes.

It took us two years to convince Pete Wilson to champion proposition 187, the immigration issue in California, and then he did it only when it became a fiscal issue. When you could say it cost the State of California 3 billion dollars a year to provide services to illegal aliens, only then was he willing to use it. It was an issue that took on a life of its own. We never planned a referendum or an initiative on this. We are going to use it to make certain executive changes and to espouse the issue. It became the key dividing issue in California politics. Even when we started 30 points behind, we realised as long as Kathleen Brown was on the other side of the immigration issue, there was no way we were going to lose. It was just a matter of time to catch up. So what polling does, it gives the candidate a sense of saliency on issues. This issue was

going to produce a much tougher reaction than some other issue even if the other issue is more popular.

Of course sometimes things do not work out. We did some work in Romania last year. We were using push questions and doing a tremendous amount of polling. Then we started using telephone polling in some of the bigger cities. The push question so upset the opposition that they raided and trashed our phone banks and accused us of being terrorists. The polling organisations that we had hired in Romania decided that they were not going to ask any more push questions because people might come and trash their operations.

Polling allows a voter to say to the politicians, "Tell me about something that you are going to do that I have not been thinking of every single day and that I am going to like when I hear it." In California it was affirmative action, immigration and now even putting money into education. In Russia it was the notion that government was actually going to pay back salaries to government employees, to raise pensions and to ease the impact of inflation on pensions. People wanted an end to the war in Chechnya, one way or another.

I think that when you use polls for other purposes or start publishing polls, then other factors come into play. One is money, especially at the initial stages of a campaign. When a poll shows that someone is trailing by 34 points, nobody wants to give money anymore. In the last gubernatorial election in California there was no doubt in our minds that election was going to be close, no matter what happened. Yet we had to struggle for almost a year and a half in raising money because every poll that came out showed us between 17 and 25 points behind. This becomes crucial when private polls are published early on in campaigns. You have to ask "Are they using this to raise money or not".

I tell my clients if we have enough money to get our message out, it does not matter a great deal how much the other guy spends. So, adequate money is important.

While money is important there are certain misconceptions about the importance of money in American elections. The landscape of American politics is littered with multi-millionaires (Ross Perot and Steve Forbes being a couple of recent examples) who thought that if they had enough money they could buy victory or at least make a respectable showing. But just spending money does not work. You have to tap into something that is of concern to people.

There are certain exceptions; circumstances where money is decisive. In the last election the AFL CIO targeted some 30 Congressmen and spent 60 million dollars in these campaigns. They managed to defeat 14 incumbents which is phenomenal by American standards. I once worked for a very large company that pumped 7-10 million dollars into a limited number of congressional races in a ten-day period. We won 15 of the 18 seats. So you have to select the races very carefully but in those select cases money can make a difference.

One final point about money. It can have negative effects as well if people become concerned about how much you are spending or where the money is coming from. When you are in an election race you have to balance many factors including the personality of the candidate, policies, party allegiance and money. In any given election all of these factors will be in play and one may turn out to be the swing factor. In another election it may be a different factor. If I was allowed to ask only one question to determine how a person would vote in a given election it would still be "What party do you support?"

Another thing that has happened in the name of polling is illustrated by a study done in the 1970s at Yale University. It found that calling people and polling them increased voter turnout. They took people who, based on voting records, had not voted in two or three years and just called them to ask: "who are you voting for in the mayoralty election in New Haven?". The result was something like a 15 or 20 percent increase in turnout.

So now people who are trying to persuade voters have created all kinds of new uses for telephone surveys. If they get a call on behalf of the XYZ campaign, wanting to know 5 things or 10 things, people just ignore it completely. But what if you get a call from somebody who says, I am with the XYZ's polling company and we would like to know who you are voting for? Now they have targeted you because you made the mistake of

telling them you are an undecided voter.

If you are a decided voter one way or another, they then give you what is a thinly disguised message. "Would you still be undecided if you know that so and so had not paid taxes in 20 years. Or, they are against welfare reform, or they voted to raise your taxes. You answer these push questions and while you think you are part of a survey, what is really happening is that you are being persuaded to vote a certain way.

Without market research in this world, it is very tough to run a campaign. There are examples of candidates who do it but usually they are sitting on the crest of issues and transcend the process .

Another trick is used by single issue operations. You get a call in advance that targeted you as an undecided voter or somebody that is interested in the environment or in crime. The next thing you know, you are getting a call from the police chief's association or the Sierra Club or somebody like that, delivering a message that you have been pre-screened for. I think that is not an ethical use of polling.

I would not want to leave the impression that strategic polling is an exact science. It is still imprecise and not everything works. Sometimes you go out and do all the surveys and spend 3 million dollars of someone's money and nothing happens. That is my worse nightmare but it happens. Then I wonder why anyone is still speaking to me. Maybe we missed the context, maybe the other side was smarter, maybe we underestimated the intelligence of the voter. There is a limit on how far you can take the people on the issues. The best strategic polling can do is give you an idea of where the salient points are and how to best present them.