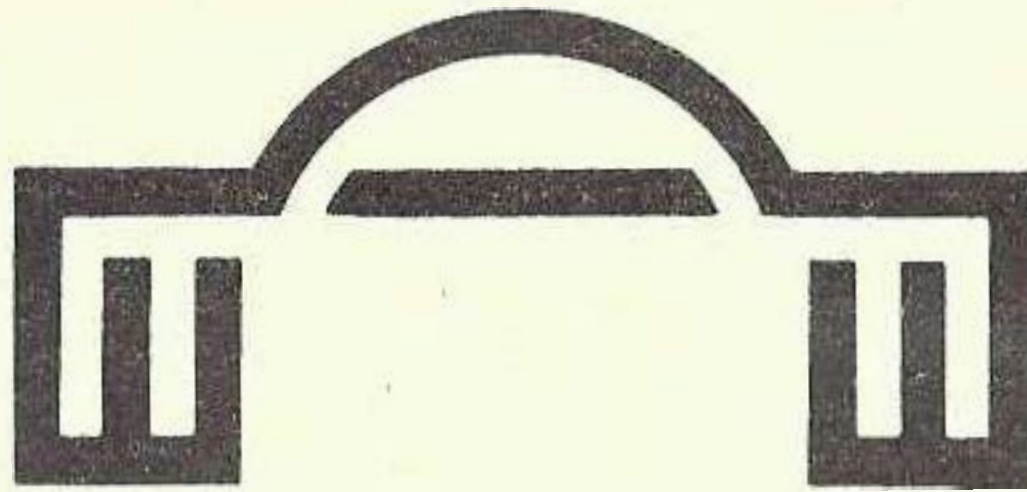




NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

News Release

For Immediate Release: October 9, 1984

RESEARCH CENTER LISTS CHECKPOINTS FOR A GOOD POLITICAL POLL

This fall, the public is being inundated with polling results on the presidential, U.S. Senate, gubernatorial, and other statewide races. What should thoughtful citizens look for in news coverage of political polls done in North Carolina? How reliable are polls? And, who are the major pollsters in North Carolina?

The answers to those questions are provided in two articles on political polling published by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research. J. Barlow Herget of Raleigh wrote these articles for North Carolina Insight, the Center's quarterly magazine. A third article reports the results of a Center poll of the political pollsters working in North Carolina. The Center asked them what constitutes a good poll, how they work, and who they work for, among other questions.

Herget lists seven factors that voters should consider in evaluating political polls. Herget says the news media should include these points in every news story on polls.

* Who sponsored the poll? By knowing who paid for the poll, the voter can make a judgment about possible bias in the poll's results.

* When was the polling done? Voters should know that the timing of a poll can affect the results. A candidate, for example, may take a poll immediately after a big TV ad blitz, and then try to show off his or her high standing in the polls. Similarly, if a candidate has just made a major public mistake -- or pulled a major coup -- his or her standing could shoot down (or up) for a short period before settling again.

* Were the respondents interviewed by telephone, mail, or in person? The Center makes no judgment about which method is best, but says news coverage should point out the strengths and weaknesses of each. The lower expense of telephone polls has made them the norm in North Carolina. People also may be more willing to tell an emotionless voice over the phone their intentions about voting.

But telephone interviews alone aren't always enough, say some pollsters. Michael Carmichael, the coordinator of polls for Rufus Edmisten's gubernatorial campaign during the primary season, puts considerable faith in face-to-face interviews -- though they are the most expensive -- in the early stages of a campaign. And, the public opinion research firm of W.H. Long Marketing, Inc. in Greensboro uses mail surveys exclusively.

Republican pollster Brad Hayes of Charlotte offered some street wisdom on the different methods. "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?" you ask. "Yeah, that's when your in-person interviewer skips a designated house because there's a bad dog on the front porch, or you get bad data because the tired interviewer sits on the curb and fills out the forms himself," says Hayes.

* What is the size of the sample? The Center says at least 600 respondents should be surveyed in North Carolina in order to give accurate data with a margin of error of 3-5 percent. Most pollsters actually survey 800-1200 people.

* What population was surveyed? Every pollster interviewed by the Center does some screening of its sample. The news media should include this information in its stories, says Herget. Examples of screening devices offered by Herget are screening out respondents who are not registered to vote, people who did not vote in the last comparable election, or people who seem unlikely to vote.

* How big are the subgroups in the sample? In North Carolina, the Center says it is particularly important to ensure that various segments of the state's diverse population are adequately represented in the sample. Voters should look to see if the poll includes enough respondents by sex, race, age, urban/rural mix, geography, etc. to represent proportionally these segments of the population according to their percentage of registered voters. For example, in a poll of 600 people, if there are three too few blacks questioned, the poll could misrepresent black voters' views.

* How are the questions worded? The Center especially advises voters to demand to know the exact wording of the questions asked. Most questions should be worded neutrally and should ask respondents to select a choice within a range of possible responses. "This is the soft part of polling," says Herget. "Some pollsters use questions tantamount to 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' that produce useless data or are designed to elicit certain responses. If the media doesn't report what questions were asked, the voters are at the mercy of the pollsters' interpretations."

Herget's articles also list the names and addresses of eighteen pollsters presently working in North Carolina plus profiles of what he calls the "Big Four" in-state pollsters. The Carolina Poll conducts two polls a year and is based at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Journalism. Walter DeVries and Associates, based in Wrightsville Beach, most recently worked for Eddie Knox's campaign for governor. KPC/Research in Charlotte conducts The Observer Poll and other special polls for Knight Publishing Company newspapers and private companies. W.H. Long Marketing, Inc. of Greensboro is the maverick firm that claims to have correctly predicted 13 out of 17 major races in the 1984 primaries, but which also elicited the strongest criticism from its polling colleagues.

Herget advises voters to remember that a good poll is only a snapshot of how the electorate is posed on a particular day. "Polls can pick up trends and movements, but they are not yet precision instruments like thermometers."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonprofit organization that conducts research on state government and state politics. The Center is funded by the Mary Reynolds Babcock and Z. Smith Reynolds foundations (both in Winston-Salem), by 30 corporate contributors, and by over 700 individual members. Past Center research has examined disparities in local school financing, state budget priorities, and the tobacco industry.

For more information, call Bill Finger, editor of North Carolina Insight, at (919) 832-2839. Copies of the polling articles are available for \$3.00 from the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602.