



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
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DIAL-IN POLLS CRITICIZED BY POLICY CENTER AND FELLOW BROADCASTERS

Commercial television stations using dial-in opinion polls may mislead the public, says the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research in the latest issue of its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight. Eight television stations from Wilmington to Asheville say they use pay-to-play opinion tallies known as dial-in polls, despite the admonitions of researchers and some broadcast journalists that the polls mislead viewers.

North Carolina broadcasters routinely have used the polls on serious and sensitive policy questions. Viewers have been asked such questions as whether former U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese should resign, whether the state should set aside a holiday honoring slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., whether North Carolina should have a state lottery, and whether the admission by Douglas Ginsburg of marijuana use should disqualify him from appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Viewers have even been asked whether former UNC-CH football coach Dick Crum should resign.

Insight Associate Editor Mike McLaughlin, who wrote the article, says, "The broadcasting community seems divided, but critics argue convincingly that there are clear dangers in using the polls on serious public policy subjects. Even one broadcaster who uses such polls refers to them as 'visual bubblegum.'"

In the dial-in poll, viewers are posed a question and asked to dial one of two 900 telephone numbers flashed on the television screen to cast either a yes or no vote. The vote is recorded by computer, and the results are fed back to the television station for on-the-air reports. There is no chance to elaborate on one's opinion or even to say a single word. The computer records the caller's choice based on the phone number the viewer dials. The viewer is then charged 50 cents on his or her telephone bill.

The key to getting an accurate public opinion sample is giving every member of a population being surveyed an equal chance of being selected. This is called random sampling, and without it, the results cannot be presented legitimately as representative of a larger population. Because viewers decide whether to participate in a dial-in poll, the concept of random sampling is violated and the results are meaningless, says McLaughlin.

Of the 17 commercial television stations across North Carolina that feature at least 30 minutes each of evening and late-night news, eight use dial-in polls, the Center reports. A ninth station, WECT in Wilmington, dropped the dial-in polls in January 1988 because they were not generating enough response to justify their cost, says Bob Keefer, WECT assignment editor. The eight stations are situated across the state so that nearly every North Carolina resident who owns a television set can tune to a station that uses the polls.

Critics say the polls are not scientific because a viewer can call as many times as he wishes and because there are no means of assuring -- through sampling or screening -- that those who phone in a vote are representative of the viewing audience or the state as a whole. Viewers can call in many times if they feel strongly enough about an issue to pay the toll.

"They're absolute junk," says Prof. Seymour Sudman, immediate past chairman of the Standards Committee of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. "They have no redeeming value at all. If the public recognized they are absolute trash, it would be okay, but many people believe they have valid meaning." Sudman says the association has taken no formal action regarding use of the polls but encourages reputable news organizations to steer clear of them. "We're sensitive about issues of free speech," says Sudman, "but we try to persuade any rational user of this thing not to do it."

The polls also have their defenders -- broadcasters who admit the polls are unscientific but believe they provide a service by giving the viewer a chance to express a yes-or-no opinion on an issue.

"It's a way to get the viewer to talk back," says Mark Casey, executive producer of the 11 p.m. news at WSOC-TV in Charlotte. "So often we just bombard people with information. Very rarely do we ask them what they think. I want to stress that dial-in polls were never intended to replace the scientific survey. They are intended to give the viewer instant, talk-back contact with a news program."

Although broadcasters who use the polls say they are careful to point out their limitations, the chance remains that the viewer will be misled or that interest groups will misrepresent the poll results.

"No matter how carefully you couch the information you present in the polls, I suspect the overwhelming impression the audience is left with is this is a scientific opinion poll and should be given the same weight in assessing public opinion," says Mark Mayhew, assistant news director at WXII-TV in Winston-Salem. "They are not designed to be accurate. All they do is muddy the waters, and there's enough misinformation out there as it is."

Critics also question the amount of air time required to promote a successful poll. "It takes up valuable time that could be used [for] more news stories," says Dave Davis, news director at WTVD in Durham. A feature package built around a dial-in poll can take two to three minutes -- a significant chunk of time that could be used for other news stories in a half hour program that usually contains only 22 minutes of news.

A dial-in poll typically is announced during the noon broadcast. Reporters may collect sidewalk interviews on the same subject which are aired along with early poll results during the 6 p.m. newscast. Viewers get reminders about the poll and the phone numbers to dial throughout the evening. The final results are broadcast at 11 p.m. "You've got to tease it," says Jim Bennett, news director at WITN in Washington, NC. "You've really got to promote it pretty heavily to get the proper response."

In one instance, viewers said they weren't interested in such opportunities. In April 1983, WBTV of Charlotte conducted a dial-in poll on dial-in polls. In response to the question, "Do you think [Channel] 3's poll is a worthwhile part of this newscast?", 63% of those responding said no. As a result, WBTV discontinued its use of dial-in polls.

Phil Meyer, a Kenan Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a nationally recognized expert on survey research methodology, says dial-in polls are best reserved for frivolous subjects. "That way, it's harder for the consumer to be misled," says Meyer. "It's hard to use it on a serious subject and then convince people it should be taken frivolously."

Meyer says the biases inherent in the dial-in poll are similar to those of the clip-out survey sometimes used by newspapers. "There is a strong probability of over-representation of people for whom time is not a heavy cost, such as retired people and bored housewives," he says. "It takes 50 cents, and it takes some effort."

Dial-in poll questions usually fall outside the bounds of the frivolous, but broadcasters say they must tap strong emotions, or no one will dial in a vote. They say the hotter the question, the better the chance for a successful poll. When WITN-TV in Washington asked its viewers about the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, for example, the calls poured in. More than 20,000 viewers responded, and the station rang up \$600 in revenue.

"It seems to me that there is a conflict between what is an appropriate subject for a dial-in poll and what makes for a good response rate," says McLaughlin. "You almost have to touch a raw nerve to succeed. I wouldn't pretend to tell a broadcast journalist what to include in a newscast, but I do think they should use good judgment -- and the best judgment is not to use such dial-in polls at all. They only create confusion about the opinions of North Carolinians on sensitive public policy issues, and they erode the credibility of those who conduct their polls according to the standards of social science."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to examine state government policies and practices. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from 109 corporate contributors and more than 700 individual and organizational members. In addition to publishing North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center also has conducted studies comparing the performance of for-profit and not-for-profit hospitals, landfill problems facing the state, and the possibility of publishing legislators' votes. Recently, the Center published rankings of the 32 most influential lobbyists in the state legislature.

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Copies of the issue of North Carolina Insight containing the research on dial-in polls are available for \$6.30 (plus \$1.00 postage and handling) from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, or call (919) 832-2839.

For more information, call Mike McLaughlin at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

North Carolina Commercial Television Stations That Conduct Dial-in Polls

Stations that
feature at least
1/2 hour each of evening
and late night news

		Conduct Dial-in Polls?	
Location		Yes	No
1. WBTW	Charlotte		X
2. WSOC	Charlotte	X	
3. WCTI	New Bern		X
4. WECT	Wilmington		X
5. WFMY	Greensboro	X	
6. WGHP	High Point	X	
7. WHKY	Hickory		X
8. WITN	Washington	X	
9. WKFT	Fayetteville		X
10. WLOS	Asheville	X	
11. WNCT	Greenville		X
12. WPCQ	Charlotte		X
13. WPTF	Raleigh	X	
14. WRAL	Raleigh	X	
15. WTVD	Durham		X
16. WWAY	Wilmington	X	
17. WXII	Winston-Salem		X

Note: WUNC Television, the state's leading public television station, carries news and public affairs programming but does not conduct dial-in polls.

Source: N.C. Center for Public Policy Research