

November 8, 2010; 4:00 PM

Open Letter on Public Polling

We are writing this open letter to express concern about the proliferation of polls conducted for public release that contain inadequate information on how they were conducted and the sometimes uncritical media coverage of them that follows.

The American Association of Public Opinion Research outlines clear and extensive standards for the report of publically released research studies. AAPOR urges full and complete disclosure at the time results are released of elements including sampling and sample design and the exact wording of questions and responses whose results are reported. We would urge the media to examine whether publically released polls meet AAPOR standards in choosing whether or not to cover them.

The practice of judging polls by their accuracy in the closing weeks of an election rather than by the professionalism with which they were conducted is unfortunate. Public polls have the capacity to shape media and donor reactions to election contests, especially in late summer and early fall when organizations and individuals are making such decisions.

It is difficult to say whether polls conducted earlier in the election cycle were accurate or inaccurate at the time, although polls that were outliers or that showed dramatic shifts in a matter of weeks warrant additional examination. The unfortunate reality is that polls that show the most dramatic numbers in terms of candidates' winning and losing often draw the most media response. It is therefore especially critical to subject such polls to rigorous examination.

Public polls differ on whether they release their likely voter screens, sample frames, demographics of the sample, on inclusion of cell phones, bilingual interviewing as appropriate, and even whether they asked other potentially biasing questions prior to the horse race. Some of these procedures are especially important in accurately polling hard to reach groups, particularly young voters, low income voters, African American voters, Latino voters, and others for whom English is a second language. The actual sample sizes in these groups, prior to any weighting of the data, are also elements in getting both the total numbers right, and in respecting the views of hard to reach populations.

The AAPOR standards address reporting of these elements because they are important in judging the quality and professionalism of polls, and in interpreting their results. We would urge extreme caution in coverage of polls that do not meet these standards and would urge judgment of polls by them rather than by apparent accuracy in the closing weeks of campaigns. A copy of the AAPOR Standards for minimal disclosure is attached.

Respectfully,

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Section III. of the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics & Practice specifies:

Standards for Minimal Disclosure

Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all public opinion researchers to include, in any report of research results, or to make available when that report is released, certain essential information about how the research was conducted. At a minimum, the following items should be disclosed.

1. Who sponsored the survey, and who conducted it.
2. The exact wording of questions asked, including the text of any preceding instruction or explanation to the interviewer or respondents that might reasonably be expected to affect the response.
3. A definition of the population under study, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population.
4. A description of the sample design, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected by the researcher, or whether the respondents were entirely self-selected.
5. Sample sizes and, where appropriate, eligibility criteria, screening procedures, and response rates computed according to AAPOR Standard Definitions. At a minimum, a summary of disposition of sample cases should be provided so that response rates could be computed.
6. A discussion of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error, and a description of any weighting or estimating procedures used.
7. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample, and the size of such parts.
8. Method, location, and dates of data collection.