The Misuse of Polling
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young
A popular old ditty goes something like this:

Clergyman: I've lost my brief case
Traveler: I pity your grief
Clergyman: My sermons are in it
Traveler: I pity the thief

In the aftermath of this year's election some candidates and their supporters seem poised to make some revisions along the following lines.

Pollster: I've lost my brief case
Politician: I pity your grief
Pollster: My polls are in it
Politician: I pity the thief

The ire against the polls is multi faceted. Some of it is understandable schadenfreude at the disastrous and embarrassing breakdown of the VNS exit polling machinery. The 2002 exit poll collapse comes on the heels of the calamitous 2000 presidential election miscalls. Poll haters would be less than human if they didn't enjoy that a little.

But the hostility expressed toward the polls this year goes beyond contempt for the exit polls. Much more serious charges have been leveled concerning the accuracy of the polls, their influence on electoral outcomes, and even their role in voting turnout.

These are all serious charges--and truth be told--they are charges that are made again and again in the aftermath of hard fought election campaigns. They deserve to be answered.

In many ways the easiest to deal with is the exit polling issue. Exit polls do have some problems. One of these is that they differ from other scientific polling--largely because dispersed polling places preclude exit pollsters from using normal sampling methods. Without wading too far into the technical aspects of exit polling, it is safe to say they should always be taken with the proverbial grain of salt--not because they are necessarily wrong, but because they are less likely to be right than other scientific polls.
The other point about exit polls is that they are sometimes misused. Calling elections on election night with exit polls in order to boost viewer ratings is a flagrant misuse of polling. The public criticism of this practice is right on point. In fact, many pollsters condemn it.

The misuse of exit polls is rooted in how they are paid for. In effect, a Faustian bargain has been made with national mass media news outlets that finance them. We get the poll results, but they get to decide how they are first used. And that first use--to call elections and build ratings--can be a misuse.

But acknowledging that exit polls are sometimes misused is not equivalent to condemning them all together. They are extremely valuable to scholars and others studying our political process and trying to understand voting behavior. Much of what we know about voting behavior and policy preferences come from past exit polls. Political Science, to cite one field, would be infinitely less rich without exit polling.

Polling misuse is also behind the criticism that the polls in this cycle were inaccurate, especially the gubernatorial polls. That charge, however, is not borne out by the facts. Most of the polls this cycle accurately described the electoral strength of both gubernatorial candidates.

But the debate about poll accuracy misses the point: public polls are not intended to forecast winners and losers. That is a misuse of polling. Polls are designed to describe the broad contours of public opinion, illuminate the mind of the electorate, and elicit policy preferences. Polls are not crystal balls.

The confusion comes from too much reporting emphasis on the so-called "horse race question." Polls do measure candidate support, but they have predictive value if done very close to Election Day--preferably election weekend. That is because electoral environments in the last ten days to three weeks can be notoriously volatile.

Voters decide whether to vote, undecided voters make up their minds, and last minute political commercials switch some voting intentions. This means that polls taken any significant time in advance of an election cannot possibly forecast with precision the outcome of that election.

A related point bears on the accuracy of polls: not all polls are equal--not by a long shot. Polling is part art and part science. But if either the science part of it or the art part of it is not well done, the poll will not be a good poll.

This bears repeating. We live in the age of what seems to be the poll de jour. Polls are ubiquitous--and because there are so many there is the tendency to take them all seriously. They all shouldn't be taken seriously.

Now to a final charge leveled at the polls: that they influence electoral outcomes. Some truth exists here--but the truth is often lost in careless generalizations.

The myth of the "bandwagon effect" is one of them. Bandwagon effects allegedly encourage voters who support the candidate leading in the poll, and discourage voters who support the trailing candidate. A losing candidate's voters, for example, might not vote at all, while undecided voters might flock to the candidate leading in the polls.
The problem with this theory is that real voters don't behave this way--or pay much attention to polls at all. In other words, there is no "band wagon effect."

And this is the conclusion of many careful studies. A voter's knowledge that a candidate is ahead or behind in the polls does not influence the voting decision. If there were a bandwagon effect candidates behind in the polls would never win on Election Day. And some do.

But while polls don't influence voters, they do have an impact on voting--and like so many things today in politics it has to do with money.

In particular, polls influence fund raising: polls showing a candidate ahead facilitate fundraising while polls showing a candidate losing tend to depress contributions. Former President Richard Nixon definitively described the symbiotic relationship between polls and fund raising this way: "I can always tell when I am doing well in the polls because the cash registers keep ringing."

Bad polls can put losing candidates on a slippery slope, because bad polls today evoke even worse polls tomorrow. Candidates who can't raise money since they are showing badly in the polls also can't get on TV as often to improve their polling numbers.

So, polls sometimes are misused--all polls are not equal, and some are not well done--and polls can affect voting especially through their influence on fundraising.

But none of the bad effects of polls are good arguments against polling. They are, however, good arguments in favor of doing polls as well as we can, and better discriminating the good from the not so good.

Polling is here to stay. It is a fact of political life. And as much as some would wish it, polling is not going to go away. But, what we can do is learn to use polls better--and to get serious about discouraging some of the misuse we have seen in this election season.

We don't need a poll to know that would be a hit.

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