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THE PROGRAM ON PUBLIC LIFE

is a non-partisan organization devoted to serving the people of North Carolina and the South by informing the public agenda and nurturing leadership.

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The polling of North Carolina

FERREL GUILLORY

Director, Program on Public Life

A driving dynamic of contemporary North Carolina politics comes of the form of nearly incessant polling of voters. Consider, for example, what happened in the aftermath of the Tuesday, June 22 runoff for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate.

Just two days later, the Under the Dome column of The News & Observer cited a Rasmussen Reports poll finding that the Democratic winner, Elaine Marshall, would begin her campaign against incumbent Republican Sen. Richard Burr in a statistical tie. A day later, a WRAL News Poll, conducted by Survey USA, showed Burr 10 percentage points ahead of Marshall.

Then, just after the July 4 holiday, Public Policy Polling weighed in with its first Senate race findings, with Burr ahead by 5 points, and Rasmussen published another set of results with Burr in an even wider lead.

Within days — before most voters could form a strong impression of the Marshall-Burr match-up — the Senate race was framed in terms of survey results. The frequency with which polling data are released to the public has reached a level beyond previous experience in this state's politics.

In keeping with our on-going efforts to document electoral trends in North Carolina, this issue of NC DataNet explores pollsters and polling.

The bylines on all of the articles here are those of students in two journalism courses in the 2010 spring semester; most were undergraduates, one is a master's student.

The project grew out of a collaboration between my colleague Ryan Thornburg and me. Selected students in his digital media class and in my basic reporting class were assigned polling-related topics to research and report. They met together regularly, collaborated with each other, as well as with Thornburg and me. As a learning exercise, students had to write and re-write.

Over the course of the summer, some articles were updated to reflect more recent developments. Brian Austin, a recent UNC graduate in political science and economics, assisted me in this work. In particular, Austin pulled together the material on national pollsters and rankings.

A word of thanks goes to my journalism faculty colleagues Dan Riffe and Philip Meyer, both of whom have extensive experience in survey research, for sitting for interviews by students working on these articles. Also thanks to Tom Jensen of Public Policy Polling and Chris Hayes of the Civitas Institute for producing data charts illustrating the findings of their respective polls. ☒

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A Citizens Guide to Polling

COURTNEY ROLLER

Reading poll results often seems a daunting, tedious task best saved for politicians and college professors. Truly understanding polls indeed takes more effort than just accepting information at face value, and this citizen's guide to polling is designed to help you do just that — and even learn to recognize your own role in the polling process.

What's polling's role in a democracy?

Though the connection may seem stretched when an automated polling voice interrupts dinner, many experts believe polling plays an important role in our democracy. In fact, Dr. Dan Riffe, editor of the "Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly" and author of "Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research," believes public opinion polling is central to the democratic process.

"There is really no other measure for you to be heard," Riffe says. Letting your opinions be known through polling gives government officials a better understanding of how the public feels about any given issue. Riffe says that petitioning the government for a redress of grievances is just as important to our First Amendment rights as the freedom of speech or religion. Polling is the most comprehensive way to let the opinions of the general public be heard on a regular basis.

Should I participate in polls?

Absolutely, yes. "The real virtue of polling is that we find out what normal people are thinking," says Dr. James Stimson, author of "Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics." The higher the response rate — or number of people who complete the survey — the more accurate and useful the data will be.

Participating in public opinion surveys constitutes one way of exercising the rights and duties of citizenship. But, just as in other

civic exercises, it is important to be informed about your participation. Sometimes advocacy groups, political campaigns or other organizations will use polling in a manipulative way to skew results. One such technique is known as "push polls."

Polling is the most comprehensive way to let the opinions of the general public be heard on a regular basis.

The American Association for Public Opinion Research defines a push poll as "political telemarketing," or a call that uses the guise of measuring opinion while actually attempting to persuade voters with questions and statements that are often biased and inflammatory. It is usually easy to distinguish a legitimate poll from a fake push poll by asking the person conducting the poll a few simple questions: Who is sponsoring this poll? What is the purpose of this poll? Who else, demographics-wise, is being polled? If the pollster fails to answer these questions or reveals a bias through the answers, it is OK to hang up the phone.

On the other hand, if you are randomly selected to participate in a legitimate poll by a reputable organization, you should tend toward participating. A polling organization concerned with obtaining the most accurate results possible will usually and willingly contact you at a more convenient time or repeat a complicated question when conducting a phone survey. Participating in a poll takes no preparation, and your lack of knowledge about a particular policy or subject is just as telling and important as any other answer may be. "If you have pre-formed ideas, they probably aren't going to fit in the interview," Stimson says. "So just listen and follow directions."



Elon Poll: Tool for teaching and service

MICHELLE CERULLI

The Elon University Poll, founded in 2000, conducts regional and statewide surveys to assess issues important to North Carolina residents. The poll is part of the Center for Public Opinion Polling.

Dr. Hunter Bacot, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, directs the poll. Dr. Mileah Kromer, an assistant professor, serves as assistant director. Bacot and Kromer oversee every aspect of the poll, which is conducted six times an academic year and is funded by the university as a public service.

Within the university, the poll functions as a teaching tool for students as well as a public relations asset for the university. The poll does not engage in contract work, which Bacot said allows for greater flexibility in poll topics. Past topics have included cell phone use while driving, the death penalty, the smoking ban and gay marriage.

Each poll is typically conducted over the course of four days, from Monday through Thursday evenings from 5 to 9 p.m. Student callers receive an hour-long training every evening, consisting of the basics of computer-assisted telephone interviewing system software and general interview protocol. Students are paid for their work, and Bacot and Kromer are available throughout the night to monitor survey progress and answer questions.

"A lot of these kids are repeat customers for us," said Kromer. "They really do know the drill, and it's an easy program to use."

The Elon University Poll uses a stratified random sample of North Carolina households with telephones and obtains the sample from Survey Sampling

Why should I pay attention to who conducts polls?

Polls can be conducted by a wide range of people and organizations including national and statewide polling firms, governmental agencies, interest groups and political campaigns, which often hire independent pollsters. Not all groups and polling organizations have the same motivations for conducting polls. Some may simply want information to back up pre-existing beliefs rather than discover diverse opinions. Others may want to sway election results by using push polls to influence voters. When reading poll results, it is important to know some information about the polling organization's mission and history before assuming its poll results are completely accurate. Reputable companies and news organizations regularly report background on their polls in a box or sidebar accompanying the results.

"It matters a lot who does the poll because some organizations are committed to accuracy and some aren't," says Stimson, who is a political science professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "I routinely tell students that any poll created by an advocacy organization should be treated as no more true than advertising claims. It is so easy to fake results."

While having a political affiliation does not automatically make the information from a polling organization inaccurate, it is important to be aware of the source and context when interpreting data.

How should I read polls reported in the newspaper or on TV?

Due to time constraints, TV news tends to break polls down to the smallest amount of data possible. Some TV stations report additional material on their websites — the more the better. If you must read poll results in a "second-hand" format, it is better to stick with newspapers, says Stimson. "Any subtleties that might appear in a newspaper story about a poll that would tell you something might be worthwhile for interpreting might not come through in broadcast," he says.

News organizations concerned with maintaining a sound reputation

International, LLC. The poll uses both land-line and cell phone numbers, and it apportions numbers to estimated cell phone use among the population, Bacot said.

The poll surveys adults 18 years and older. When students call a household, they ask for the oldest or youngest adult of the home. The poll system software randomly rotates which adult, oldest or youngest, is requested throughout the night.

Also randomly rotated by the computer system is word order within questions, which Bacot said helps to maintain integrity and avoid potential biases in question construction. As for potential interviewer bias, Bacot and Kromer don't see it as being an issue with the Elon Poll. The survey questionnaire, called the instrument, is usually anywhere from 50 to 60 questions long, including demographic questions.

"We compare our sample to the population and then determine if we have to weight," Bacot said. "And then if we do have to weight, what we have to weight it by. We release that information."

If survey results approach a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points, the poll will be weighted, Bacot said.

Bacot and Kromer get their ideas for survey questions by monitoring what's going on in local and state newspapers, the legislature, institutes, committees and hearings. They often receive calls from newspaper editors and the general public asking for information about specific state issues.

feel obligated to comply with the American Association of Public Opinion Research's standards of disclosure for reporting polls. Look for the disclosure information; if it's minimal or not there, be wary. These standards, which include disclosing polling methods, discussing the precision of results and printing the exact wording of questions used in the poll, among other things, ensure polls are conducted ethically and results are as accurate as possible.

Are all polls created equal?

No. All polls are not created equal. A poll's accuracy depends on many variables, including the methods. Typically, a phone survey is more accurate than mail-in survey and a mail-in survey is more accurate than an internet poll. Almost all polling experts agree that a face-to-face

*It is important to be aware of the source
and context when interpreting data*

interview from a randomly selected group of homes is the best format, yet this type of polling is a now rare because of the ease and lower cost of phone surveys.

There are some good indicators of a poll's accuracy that the average citizen can utilize. Riffe cites some key questions everyone should consider when reading a poll. First, know who is sponsoring the poll. Understanding the biases and motivations of the group sponsoring and funding a poll can key you in on what the ultimate goals of a poll may be. Second, know who actually conducted the survey. Knowing whether the survey-takers were paid professionals, citizen volunteers or college students working for extra credit can give you clues as to how nearly precise are the results. Third, be aware of how exactly the questions

If the poll has data on the issues, Bacot directs callers to the poll's website (<http://www.elon.edu/e-web/elonpoll/>) where they will be able to find the information. If not, the inquiry might lead Bacot and Kromer to a new survey topic.

Over the years, the Elon University Poll has found that the majority of survey respondents would support a statewide North Carolina smoking ban in public places (Oct. 2006), disapprove of the way President George W. Bush handled the Iraq war (Oct. 2007), and favor laws to ban cell phone use while driving (March 2009). More recently, the poll found that out of 508 North Carolina adults surveyed, 75 percent disapprove of the way Congress is doing its job, while 53 percent view President Barack Obama favorably (Feb. 2010).

Survey results are typically released to the public two business days after the poll concludes. A press release is written up and sent to reporters, think tanks, university faculty and staff. The press release along with the data and information on demographic variables is published online at the poll's website.

As for the students, without whom the poll would not function, many have continued their work with polling after graduating.

"We've had a lot of students tell us they've learned the most working at the poll," Kromer said. "Kids have gone on to work for the U.S. Census and Gallup. It's great for us because that's what we're really here for." ☒



were worded. Most polling organizations release a list of questions with their poll results, which allows evaluation of the responses and whether the survey contained intentional or unintended biases.

Some polling organizations are so biased that their inaccuracies cannot be chalked up to methodological mistakes and are not worth reading at all, says Philip Meyer, former president of the American Association of Public Opinion Research. Many independent Web sites and polling associations like AAPOR are doing an increasingly better job at pointing out which organizations repeatedly fail to comply with industry standards. AAPOR, for instance, has a list of guidelines for pollsters to

Typically, a phone survey is more accurate than mail-in survey and a mail-in survey is more accurate than an internet poll.

follow in order to ensure polling accuracy and transparency. Meyer says the most common violation made by polling organizations is a failure to reveal their methodology — a red flag for anyone reading such a poll. “That is violated so much,” Meyer says. “If a poll is going to be scientific, the first test of science is to tell how you got your information.”

What is sample size?

Sample size is the number of people who respond to any given poll. There is no standard sample size that indicates an accurate poll, but there are some typical rules of thumb. Meyer says that a small sample size is often sufficient — 384 respondents are enough to get a 5 percent margin of error 95 percent of the time.

“The reasons most survey samples are larger than that is because we can use them to subdivide the sample,” Meyer says. “That’s why most

commercial polls are at least 1,500.”

A sample size of 1,500 assures enough responses to allow pollsters to split the data into multiple categories, so that you can obtain insights into attitudes based on gender, race or education level and the like.

Still, some people have trouble accepting that such a small population can speak for an entire group. To conceptualize this, Meyer says to think about sample size as taste-testing a spoonful of soup rather than eating the whole pot. In the same way that it is unnecessary to eat an entire pot of soup to see if it is salty enough, a small group of people can express the general opinions of a larger population.

What is margin of error?

Margin of error is a calculation of how accurate a poll’s results are. In general, a larger margin of error means a less precise poll. The margin of error shows how closely the polling organization can account for the entire population’s opinion.

Another other aspect that should be considered in conjunction with the margin of error is the confidence interval. The confidence interval represents the chance that the actual population falls within the margin of error. For example, if a poll has a margin of error of +/- 5 percent and a confidence interval of 95 percent that means the organization can say that this poll is accurate within 5 percentage points 95 percent of the time. The industry standard for polls is a 95 percent confidence interval so it is important to watch out for polls that use a confidence interval that falls below this percent.

What is weighting?

Weighting happens when a polling organization lacks an proportional amount of participation from a certain group. In order to compensate for this lack of representation, the responses of members from the underrepresented group are calculated at a higher percentage than the other respondents’ responses. Weighting does not inherently make a poll inaccurate, but once again, readers have a right to insist that pollsters remain transparent about their methods.

The important thing to consider about weighting is why the people whose responses are weighted are not being represented in equal numbers in the original survey, says Meyer. “The fact that you didn’t get the others means there is something different about them, and it may be related to what you’re measuring.” ☒



Civitas: Polls and Lunches

JONATHAN CROOK

The John W. Pope Civitas Institute focusing its polls on gathering opinion of North Carolina citizens on issues related to state and federal government. What makes Civitas distinctive among polling organizations in North Carolina are 1) its standing as a conservative political voice, 2) its monthly luncheons and discussions around its poll results, and 3) its methodology of polling.

Civitas, a nonprofit organization, was founded in April 2005 by John William Pope, a prominent North Carolina-born retailer who started such stores as Roses, Maxway, Super Dollar and Eagles. The institute was born to serve as a partner with the John Locke Foundation, a conservative think tank, but with the main purpose of giving citizens more of a voice. Its stated purposes are to “empower, educate, and inform.”

“Basically we are here to try to help publicize and get the word out and educate the public on what’s going on in state government,” said Chris Hayes, senior legislative analyst and head of polling for Civitas. “We are focused specifically on state government actions.”

In terms of where its political ideology is centered, Hayes said, “We make no bones about it. We are a conservative organization. But we think our polling is down the line. We feel pretty strongly that our polling is done very above board, will meet any rigorous test of standards and ethics.”

Although polling is probably what Civitas is most well-known for, it also provides training for individuals interested in getting involved in state politics. The institute boasts that its trainers have more than 60 years of experience, and teach such topics as campaign organization,

budgeting, fundraising, and new media strategies.

Civitas has been active in polling since its founding, with its first poll being published within one month of the non-profit’s existence. It releases a poll at the end of every month, at an event to which the institute brings in a panel of political figures and citizens to talk about issues raised by the poll.

“We were looking for ways to have a monthly event not only to make awareness of the organization and get people involved and used to coming to events but also as a way to get the information out,” Hayes said.

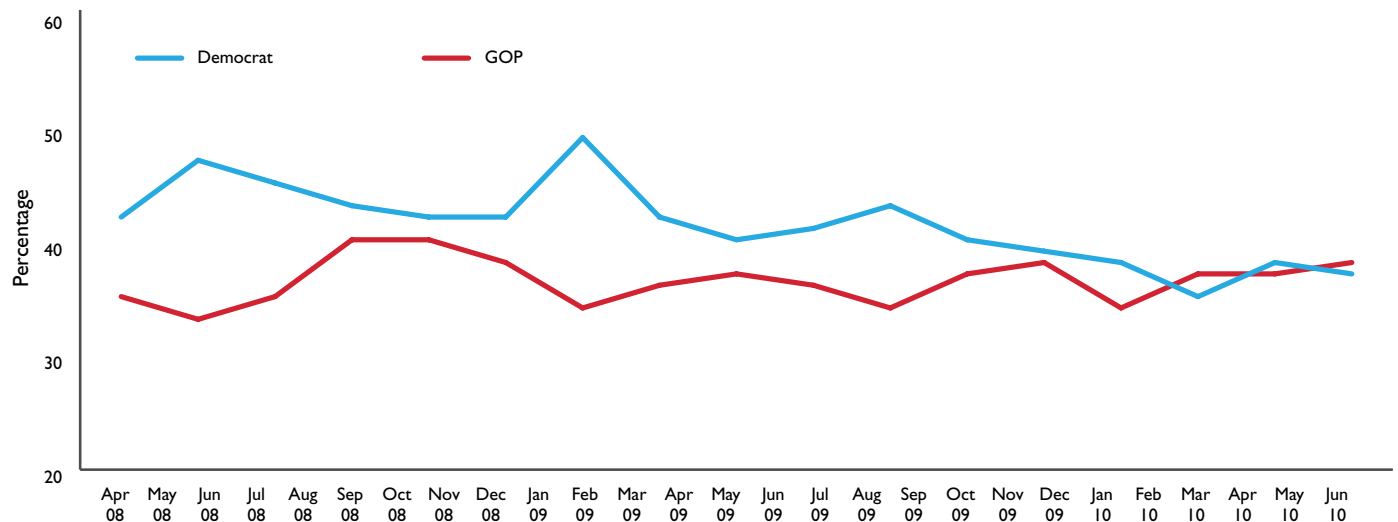
Unlike its for-profit competitors like Public Policy Polling, Civitas does not conduct polls for outside entities. It creates its own set of questions every month, and gives them to outside companies to perform the actual surveying of North Carolina citizens. Most Civitas polls are conducted by TelOpinion Research based in Alexandria, VA, but it has also used McLaughlin & Associates, a national polling and research firm.

According to Hayes, who has been running the polling operations for Civitas for the past two and a half years, TelOpinion sets up a list of telephone numbers to call; its sample includes only North Carolina citizens who have registered to vote since 2008, or have voted in the 2008 or 2006 elections. Civitas polls sample an average of 600 such voters every month.

The polling itself is done mainly through live operator interviews, but in the past year Civitas has dabbled in using the punch-pad technique. Despite this recent shift in technique, Hayes still thinks that the questions posed by a live operator is the better way to poll.

“I think the live caller polling gets you better responses, and you can ask more in-depth questions than you can on ‘robo-polling,’” he said. “We can also do longer polls to get more involved and ask open ended questions.”

North Carolina General Assembly Generic Ballot



In addition to differences in political leanings, a major difference between Civitas polls and Public Policy Polling has to do with the concept of weighting. PPP, as well as most polling firms, engage in weighting: If total respondents polled show, for example, a higher ratio of males to females than the state's population, pollsters randomly eliminate enough male responses to make the ratio match the total population. Civitas has decided not to engage in weighting.

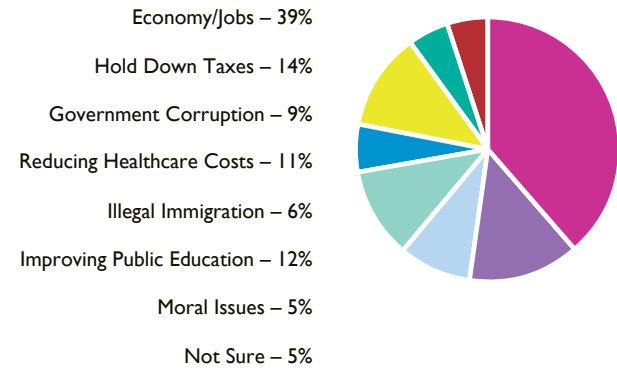
"We don't aim to do any weighting at all," Hayes said. "We want the polls to reflect not only the population at large but the sample of people who say they're voters at this time. Usually they come back pretty accurate on demographics, so that we don't need to do any weighting."

Although Hayes asserted that in general Civitas declines to weight, he added that if a certain poll came back with one demographic group greatly skewed, he and his staff would "bump it a little bit" to get the ratios more accurate.

With many young people and households going "cell-phone only," there is a big question mark in the near future for pollsters in general who rely on home phones to do their work.

"Everything I've seen shows that the younger people who are cell phone only and those that have landlines think very similarly," he said. "The people who you are getting in the younger age demographic match up on their answers pretty closely. It's something that all pollsters are going to have to address pretty soon." ☒

June 2010: When you think about voting for a member of the State Legislature, what issue or problem should be their priority?



SurveyUSA: Automated polling

COURTNEY ROLLER

SurveyUSA, the largest independent media-polling firm in the United States, conducts both public opinion surveys and market research. Headquartered in Clifton, N.J., SurveyUSA was founded by owner and CEO Jay Leve in 1990. It primarily conducts polls through recorded-voice, or automated, phone calls.

In an analysis written by Leve for Joint Statistical Meetings in August 2009 — "Limitations of Recorded-Voice Telephone Polling in Election 2008: Is This Method of Data Collection Doomed in 2012?" — Leve discusses the history of SurveyUSA.

In 1990, telephone interviews were labor-intensive and often resulted in interviewer-introduced errors due to the poor training, low pay and the monotony of such work. SurveyUSA decided that, if data could be collected at a lower cost and if errors in data-collection were reduced, the economics of polling could be reinvented.

Using digitally mastered voices of local TV news anchors, SurveyUSA began beta-testing recorded-voice polling software for the Clinton-Bush-Perot presidential election in 1992. In 1993, the firm began signing media clients. By the 1996 presidential election, SurveyUSA was conducting daily, nationwide tracking polls and interviewing more respondents than any other polling firm at that time.

Since 1996 SurveyUSA has offered TV station-clients the option of paying a pre-set price for what SurveyUSA's website refers to as an "unlimited number of research studies." SurveyUSA clients are able to ask quantitative and qualitative questions and can see a turnaround in results as quickly

as the same day or more than a week. Pre-election polls are typically taken over three or four consecutive nights. Mostly, SurveyUSA's election coverage is paid for by TV stations. SurveyUSA has completed more than 30 million interviews and polled on more than 900 elections including municipal, statewide and presidential. More well-known clients include AOL Time Warner, Gannett Co. Inc., NBC inc., PepsiCo Inc., New York Times Company, Victoria's Secret, and Walt Disney Company. Its website lists WTVD, Channel 11, in Durham and WFMY, Channel 2 in Greensboro, as TV stations for which it has conducted polls.

SurveyUSA, a non-partisan organization, is a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR) in 1993 and also adheres to the standards of The Market Research Association (MRA), The Council of Marketing and Opinion Researchers (CMOR) and the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO). Additionally, Leve serves as the secretary/treasurer and former trustee at the National Council of Public Polls.

Along with adhering to the standards and disclosure requirements of professional associations, SurveyUSA tracks and publishes how much of a liberal or conservative bias is apparent in its polls in order to maintain a respectable non-partisan status. SurveyUSA also releases an accuracy report card at the end of each election so that its performance can be measured in absolute and relative terms against competing organizations.

As a result of the burgeoning use of cell phones and the downsizing of traditional media, "opinion research needs to be re-conceptualized from scratch," said Leve in an email. "Nothing less." ☒

A cast of influential pollsters

BRIAN AUSTIN AND MATT LANG

The proliferation of polling data has created a new parlor game in the political arena: a rating of the reliability of pollsters. Nate Silver, the statistical mind behind the website, www.fivethirtyeight.com, publishes one of the most innovative ways of looking at polling data today.

His site is barely two years old, but it has already generated headlines as pollsters see their relative rankings as a threat to their credibility or their ability to attract business. At about the same time Silver began posting statistical analysis of various kinds during the 2008 election, other websites, notably www.RealClearPolitics.com, began to post aggregations of pollsters' output.

Silver is up-front about his methods for ranking the data of pollsters, but the matter is up for serious debate in the highly charged political community. Some say his analysis amounts too much to a black box, giving ambiguous "weight" to pollsters that hit truer to the mark. Still, Silver has made such a mark that The New York Times will soon host his blog.

An accompanying chart of Silver's rankings gives North Carolinians a chance to consider his way of evaluating pollsters who do work in North Carolina. It is important to pay attention to the factors he weighs, as well as to the track record of the pertinent firms.

What follows are short profiles of pollsters who do work in North Carolina, including several who work — or have worked — for candidates.

Garin-Hart-Yang

The Garin-Hart-Yang Research Group, the political division of Peter D. Hart Research Associates, is a major national polling firm with a long-standing involvement in North Carolina. Peter Hart served as pollster in the early campaigns of former four-term Gov. James B. Hunt Jr.

Gov. Bev Perdue is one of five sitting governors who retained Garin-Hart-Yang's services in their successful gubernatorial races in 2008. Similarly, the firm helped her predecessor, Gov. Mike Easley, win his two terms as the state's chief executive. Frederick S. Yang, a partner in the group, has been a major player in North Carolina's gubernatorial politics as an adviser to Democratic candidates.

"Our presence in North Carolina has only gotten bigger since the Easley reelection," said Allan Rivlin, a partner at Hart Research Associates. "Though it was a momentous occasion for us, we still feel that there's plenty left to be done. We haven't finished with this state yet."

Across the nation, Garin-Hart-Yang has conducted more than 5,000 public opinion surveys and has analyzed and administered interviews to more than three million people. Since its founding in 1971, the Democratic polling firm has worked with 40 U.S. senators and 30 governors.

Public Opinion Strategies

Public Opinion Strategies serves as the polling firm for U.S. Sen. Richard Burr's re-election campaign this year. It is one of the nation's preeminent market research organizations with Republicans as clients. Its partners include such GOP strategists as Neil Newhouse, Glen Bolger and Bill McInturff.

The 2004 Burr campaign also hired Public Opinion Strategies. Its clients have included U.S. Rep. Walter Jones of North Carolina's Third Congressional District and state House Republicans.

In the last five election cycles POS has helped elect more than 50 new members of the U.S. House. With offices in Washington, Denver and Los Angeles, the group provides research and advice to corporate clients and monitors public opinion on a variety of issues.

In North Carolina, the firm's website reports, it has completed 232 research projects since 1991, interviewed more than 97,000 North Carolinians, and polled in 11 congressional districts and two dozen legislative districts.

Ayres, McHenry and Associates

Whit Ayres, the founder of this Republican political consulting firm, has for more than two decades served as a major strategist for the GOP in the South. His North Carolina clients have included former Republican gubernatorial candidate Fred Smith and the Republican state Senate campaign trust.

Ayres received his bachelor's degree from Davidson College, and earned both a master's and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Now based in Alexandria, Va., Ayres is a frequent commentator on Southern political trends, often featured at gathering of GOP officials.

"Republican strategists see an opening in the fact that independent voters like President Obama but are nervous about his economic policies," said Ayres, in a recent interview. "But I can tell you that the climate is significantly different today than it was at this point in the 2006 or 2008 election cycle. So there is something going on. Whether that continues or not is going to be driven by events."

Global Strategy Group

Global Strategy Group, based in New York City, is a public affairs research firm whose clients include Democratic political candidates, corporations and advocacy organizations. The group provides strategic advice to the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Governors Association.

For several years, one of its partners was Harrison Hickman, a North Carolinian.

Hickman served a major adviser to the late former Gov. Terry Sanford in his 1986 U.S. Senate race, as well as to former Sen. John Edwards in his 1998 Senate race and subsequent national campaigns. In 2000, Hickman played a major role in the campaign of Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore and in the Edwards presidential campaign of 2008.

In early August, Hickman announced the formation of a new company, Hickman Analytics Inc., based in Chevy Chase, Md. Meanwhile, Global Strategy Group continues to work with a wide array of clients that have included The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other philanthropies, Goldman Sachs, the New York Yankees, ABC News, and the Council of State Governments.

Rasmussen Reports

The Rasmussen organization has made an impact in the polling field simply by being everywhere. CEO Scott Rasmussen has been an independent pollster since 1994 and founded Rasmussen Reports in 2003. (Rasmussen and his father were co-founders of the sports network ESPN, and sold their interest in 1984.)

Rasmussen has blanketed the country with surveys. His polling is so

widespread and readily available that it is regularly used as a source by news media, including reporters in North Carolina.

The Rasmussen Reports website is replete with analyses of political ups and downs. For example, in early August, Rasmussen began a report

with this finding: “New polling from North Carolina moves that state from Solid GOP to Leans GOP in the Rasmussen Reports Balance of Power rankings.” ☒

Explanation of Nate Silver’s rankings (*fivethirtyeight.com*)

Polling analyst Nate Silver first began “grading” polling results during the Democratic primary in 2008, attempting to improve upon existing polling aggregations from RealClearPolitics by incorporating a weighted value to the polling results that would describe the relative success of each pollster. The grades are designed “to form an objective assessment of pollster quality with respect to the pollster’s aptitude in accurately forecasting election outcomes. He uses only polls released into the public domain in the period immediately prior to an election. So public policy questions, for instance, are not included in the ratings because of the difficulty in evaluating them in an objective comparison to reality.

Silver has released several iterations of these polling grades. The accompanying chart shows his rankings, released in June of 2010. These ratings use a concept he developed called “Pollster Introduced Error,” which reflects the amount of error associated with a pollster beyond what is unavoidable due to things like sampling variance. A lower score here is better. The analysis also takes into account the number of polls released by the firm, giving the standard statistical notation “n” for the number of polls. Some firms, like Ayres, McHenry and Associates, simply do not release enough polling data to the public to have relevant or accurate scores in Silver’s metric.

Nate Silver Rankings

Pollster	PIE	n	rawscore	Pollster	PIE	n	rawscore
★ Field Poll	+1.05	19	-2.81	RKM Research	+2.08	21	-0.41
★ ABC/Washington Post	+1.12	40	-1.50	Albuquerque Journal	+2.08	17	-0.46
★ SurveyUSA	+1.19	634	-0.84	Los Angeles Times	+2.08	39	-0.21
★ Ciruli	+1.20	14	-1.82	● Global Strategy Group	+2.08	12	-0.59
★ U. Cincinnati / Ohio Poll	+1.25	22	-1.39	Hotline / Diageo	+2.09	15	-0.49
★ Selzer & Co.	+1.31	27	-1.12	Mitchell	+2.12	21	-0.26
★ NBC / Wall Street Journal	+1.53	11	-0.34	● YouGov / Economist / Polimetrix	+2.12	132	-0.29
★ AP-GfK	+1.56	16	-0.27	EPIC / MRA	+2.14	24	-0.16
Mason-Dixon	+1.57	346	-0.51	IBD / TIPP	+2.14	14	-0.27
★ Pew Research	+1.60	15	-0.06	● Garin Hart Young	+2.15	12	-0.28
★ Gallup	+1.66	74	-0.19	Gannett / Monmouth	+2.17	17	-0.10
★ Market Shares	+1.68	26	+0.07	Newsweek	+2.19	16	-0.04
Public Policy Polling	+1.69	107	-0.66	★ ● Harris Interactive	+2.20	126	+0.16
Blum & Weprin	+1.70	14	-2.82	Quinnipiac	+2.22	95	+0.18
Rasmussen Reports	+1.74	400	-0.32	FOX / Opinion Dynamics	+2.22	32	+0.15
★ RT Strategies	+1.75	42	+0.14	Default rating / New pollster	+2.26		
★ Fairleigh Dickinson	+1.75	13	+0.67	Star Tribune	+2.26	17	+0.28
★ Rutgers	+1.76	10	+0.88	Suffolk	+2.28	40	+0.32
★ Marist	+1.77	46	+0.17	Muhlenberg	+2.32	15	+0.50
★ Siena	+1.77	11	+0.88	Battleground	+2.36	26	+0.58
✘ Strategic Vision	+1.83	123	-0.38	Zogby (telephone)	+2.39	355	+0.40
● Tarrance	+1.87	11	-1.69	GQR / Democracy Corps	+2.41	36	+0.69
Louisville Courier-Journal	+1.89	10	-1.68	Dan Jones	+2.42	13	+1.01
CNN / Opinion Research	+1.94	39	-0.59	Franklin Pierce	+2.43	17	+0.96
★ CBS / New York Times	+1.94	44	+0.61	Big Ten	+2.46	10	+1.31
U. Massachusetts	+1.99	10	-1.18	Columbus Dispatch	+2.59	13	+1.78
KRC Communications Research	+1.99	22	-0.69	Opinion Research Associates	+2.65	10	+2.30
★ U. New Hampshire	+2.03	53	+0.71	Research 2000	+2.66	286	+0.71
National Journal	+2.03	12	-0.84	● Public Opinion Strategies	+2.73	25	+1.81
Franklin & Marshall	+2.04	12	-0.81	American Research Group	+2.73	178	+0.84
Richard Day Research	+2.05	11	-0.81	Insider / Advantage	+2.84	74	+1.38
Elway	+2.05	10	-0.85	● Zogby Interactive	+4.17	70	+3.30

★ Committed to NCPP / AAPOR disclosure standards as of 6/1/10
 ● Internet-based poll

● Democratic campaign pollster
 ● Republican campaign pollster

✘ Blacklisted for extreme misconduct; substantial likelihood polls were fabricated

Public Policy Polling: Raleigh-based, nationwide

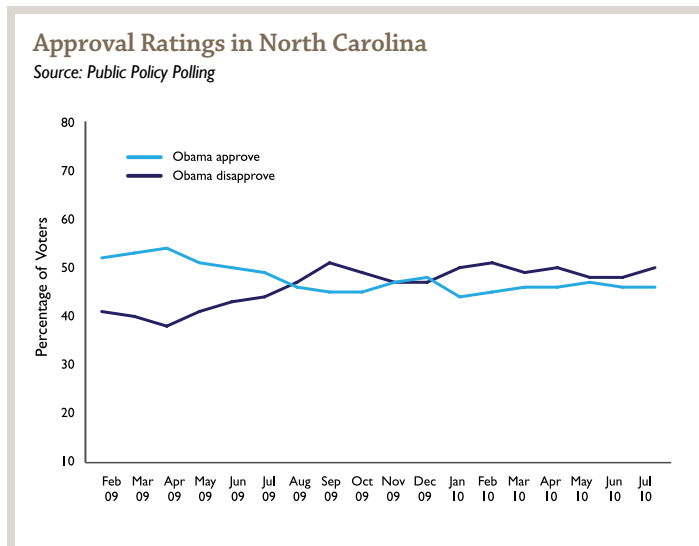
DANIEL COOK

Public Policy Polling, based in Raleigh, was founded in 2001 to serve local candidates who did not have enough money to contract pollsters of their own. Dean Debnam, president and CEO, created the agency after his wife, Stephanie Fanjul, ran for mayor in Raleigh in 1999, when they discovered the relative lack of polling available concerning local issues as well as the

At first, PPP focused on local issues and served local politicians, primarily Democrats, by providing data on issues on questions in Raleigh and the Triangle.

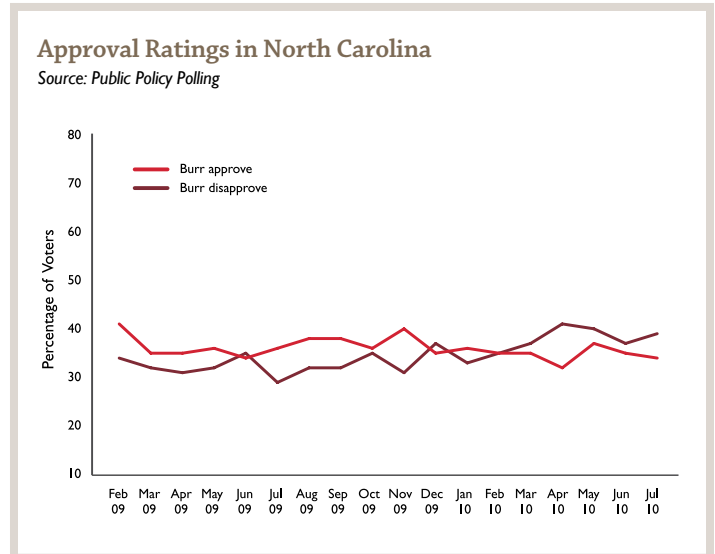
high cost of contracting independent pollsters.

Debnam, a graduate of North Carolina State University, is a successful businessman in Raleigh. In addition to serving as CEO of Public Policy Polling, he is president of Ultimate Products, a manufacturer of pre-engineered buildings and heating products, and chairman and CEO of Workplace Options, a health and wellness company covering more than 19



million employees in 13,000 companies across 140 countries.

At first, PPP focused on local issues and served local politicians, primarily Democrats, by providing data on issues on questions in Raleigh and the Triangle. Then in 2005, Jim Shields, who served as director of the American Civil Liberties Union in North Carolina and earlier taught opinion research at the University of Nevada, and Justin Guillory, then a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina, were hired to expand the poll. PPP then began polling across North Carolina on issues most important to the state as a whole and to candidates for state office.



In 2007, when Guillory went to work for Gov. Bev Perdue's campaign, PPP hired Tom Jensen, another UNC graduate who had worked for the Sierra Club. Since then, PPP has entered the arena of national polling, gauging public opinion both in North Carolina and in other states. What began as a small organization to help candidates and public officials of Raleigh has grown into a prolific poll, cited often in political commentary across the nation.

While PPP charges candidates and organizations for its services, it offers statewide results free online.

Public Policy Polling has provided data at a low cost in large part by using the interactive voice response (IVR) method. IVR, also used by SurveyUSA, features an automated messaging system to ask questions, to which respondents answer by pressing the numbers on their telephones. An automated voice often leads respondents to hang up before taking the survey. Still, Jensen says, a low response rate has not appeared to make PPP surveys less accurate than other polling methods, including trained survey-takers who interact with the respondents over the phone. The IVR method allows for a large number of phone calls that, in turn, produce a high number of good responses.

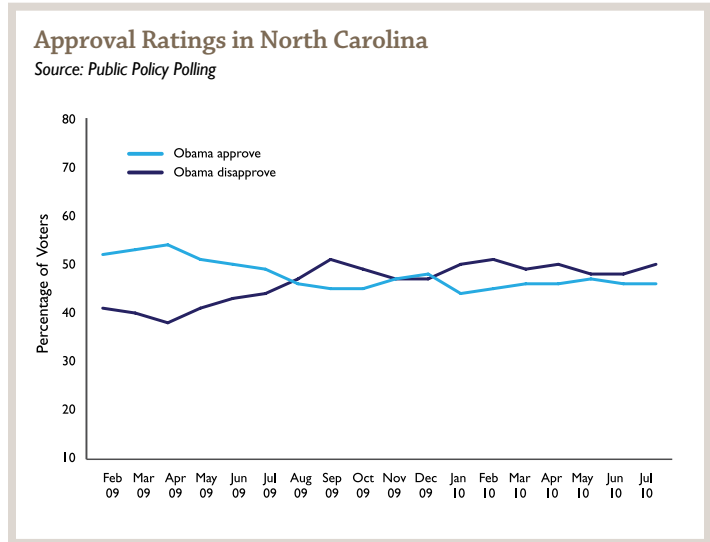
PPP uses the voter registration database provided publicly by the state boards of elections to determine its sample. The sample includes likely voters, which PPP defines as people having voted in at least one of the previous three elections. If the survey topic is primary elections, then likely voters are defined only as those who have voted in one of the previous three primary elections – general elections would not count. Jensen said that while other polls try to get a representative sample of the population as a whole, PPP wants likely voters because they make the decisions on Election Day.

In publishing poll results, PPP offers cross-tab charts breaking down the results, for example, to show how women responded to a question compared to men, or how those in the upper-income bracket responded to a question compared with those in a lower-bracket. "We want all the information we gather from the poll to be made available to the public," Jensen explained. "It's important to be transparent. People can't say the poll is biased without a reason."

IVR does not allow for confirmation as to who is answering the questions, but in the introduction to the survey the person answering the phone will be asked to hang up if he or she is not a registered voter. If a poll is completed with a sample not representative of the target population, PPP uses a form of statistical weighting to create a more nearly accurate gauge of public opinion. Jensen said the poll often will receive responses from too many women, too many whites and too many older voters, requiring them to weight the results so as to have a representative sample in the final, published results.

While PPP charges candidates and organizations for its services, it offers statewide results free online.

In the Nov. 6, 2008, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, PPP was ranked the second most accurate polling firm out of those that polled most often across America during the week prior to the general election. Second only to SurveyUSA, PPP averaged only 1.04 percentage points off the mark when compared to actual election results.



While PPP conduct polls on issues such as the Wake County school assignment debate, most of its work involves tracking polls of candidates and approval ratings of public officials. Tracking polls ask the same question over time to discover trends. ☒

N.C. Voter Registration — Then and Now

Source: State Board of Elections

November 4, 2008

Total voters – 6,264,733

By Party

Democratic – 2,866,669
 Republican – 2,002,416
 Libertarian – 3,637
 Unaffiliated – 1,392,011

By Race/Ethnicity

White – 4,596,479
 Black – 1,354,976
 American Indian – 48,605
 Hispanic – 68,053
 Other – 101,217

By Gender

Men – 2,822,503
 Women – 3,391,427

September 18, 2010

Total voters – 6,169,912

By Party

Democratic – 2,763,355
 Republican – 1,949,019
 Libertarian – 8,568
 Unaffiliated – 1,448,970

By Race/Ethnicity

White – 4,517,112
 Black – 1,332,063
 American Indian – 48,164
 Hispanic – 77,089
 Other – 105,568

By Gender

Men – 2,782,591
 Women – 3,335,910

Polling at a crossroads

JONATHAN CROOK

As with any business that relies heavily on technology, public opinion polling has changed dramatically over the years, and it is now at a crossroads in a world where current techniques are slipping toward obsolescence everyday.

The rising use of cell phones, the Internet and mobile devices in the United States is making people easier to reach on the one hand, and more difficult for pollsters to contact on the other.

A key problem rests in the still murky waters of legislation regulating the levels of access pollsters get to technologies as they are becoming more prevalent in target populations. Pollsters also detect a conflict between getting samples that accurately reflect the population versus getting volunteers that skew the sample towards specific demographic segments.

The Gold Standard Of Polling

The most popular form of polling in the era before high telephone use involved pollsters going into the homes of the target population and conducting a personal interview, allowing the subtleties in the respondent's answers to be recorded, and for near demographic accuracy to be reached.

"Gallup used to use 300 clusters of neighborhoods nationwide, and then do five interviews for each cluster," said Philip Meyer, a retired professor at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Journalism and Mass Communication and author of "Precision Journalism." "Because of the social transaction, you got good information."

The heart of polling is creating a sample that accurately reflects the larger population. This means taking the demographics of the whole and dividing them until you have a smaller version of the population, but with the same demographic proportions. In-home visiting created an opportunity to create sound samples that reflected the population, and at the same time to get the respondents' feelings toward issues.

"Face-to-face polling was considered to be the best form of polling in the past," said Dr. Daniel Riffe, the Richard Cole Eminent professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. "It was the gold standard, but it was very expensive."

As the number of citizens using telephones in their homes increased, pollsters saw a less-expensive opportunity to incorporate the-then new technology into their surveying, bringing about the era of random-digit-dialing.

The Advent Of The Telephone

According to Riffe, the most commonly used form of public opinion polling today is the random dialing of land-line telephones.

With this method, pollsters obtain a large supply of telephone numbers, often from voter registration of citizens who voted in the most recent presidential election. They will then use randomized dialers to call each household over a defined period. The number of quality responses will generally be far less than the initial number of households called — that is, some people simply decline to participate.

After all of the responses are in, the pollsters randomly eliminate respondents from various demographic categories until the sample

proportionately reflects the population. For example, if the population is 1,000 people — half men, half women, and the polling sample was 70 men and 50 women, the pollster would randomly eliminate 20 of the male respondents to make the sample accurately reflect the proportion — 50/50.

This technique became the go-to for pollsters in the 1980s when nearly 95 percent of all households in the United States reported having telephones. However, according to Meyer, problems relating to technologies sprung up almost immediately.

"The first thing that screwed us up was call-waiting, caller ID, and answering machines," Meyer said.

Even though polling companies could call these households, they could not ensure that the people they sought to interview would answer. Many times, citizens ask that their names be removed from the calling lists that pollsters use, eliminating possible voices for the polls.

Disruptive Technologies

Although random-digit-dialing is still used by a majority of pollsters today, there are even newer problems arising. Land-lines are quickly becoming a thing of the past. According to a November 2009 study from eMarketer.com, mobile-phone penetration, or number of households with the wireless technology, was at 76.5 percent in the United States, and was estimated to rise to 80 percent by 2013.

Not only is cell phone usage in general becoming more widespread, but the number of households in the United States that use cell phones as a sole means for telephone communication is rising. The Centers for Disease Control released a study in March 2009 that showed that in 2007, 15.9 percent of households were wireless-only in North Carolina, and that figure is expected to grow with time.

As more households become wireless-only, the effects on polling are beginning to be seen. A study by the Pew Research Center during the 2008 election showed that polling on candidate preference that included cell phones produced results 2-3 percent more in favor of Democratic candidate Barack Obama than those polls that only surveyed land-lines. On top of that, those respondents who were registered as being "cell-phone only" were 10 to 15 percentage points more supportive of Obama than "land-line only" respondents.

Such disparities arise from differences in the demographic profile of citizens who rely only on cell phone and those who maintain a land-line. Young people are much more likely to be "cell-phone only" than citizens 45 and older. Since age is one of the important characteristics in a public opinion survey, this shift in technological availability is making accurate polling difficult.

Despite the fact that more people are now using cell phones as a means of communication, fewer of them are available to respond to today's pollsters. The federal Telephone Consumer Protection Act bans unsolicited cell phone calls that use automated dialing devices.

The Future of Polling

One possible solution to the problems plaguing telephone-based polling may be the use of the Internet as a primary means of collecting public opinion. The most recent statistics show that 227.7 million Americans have regular access to the Internet, a penetration of about 90.1 percent.



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According to Meyer, the use of the Internet poses its own obstacles to pollsters. When someone goes to a Web site, they are there by choice, he said.

“The basic rule is that every person must have an equal chance of falling into the sample.” Meyer said. “There is no way to tell that with polling volunteers.”

Meyer also believes that the ultimate direction of polling may head back into the home, where the business began, and where he thinks it flourished.

“I don’t know how many will agree, but I think the future will be going into homes again,” Meyer said.

The future of polling may involve a combination of the techniques used today, arrayed synergistically. Address-based polling, as Riffe

described it, would use third-party companies to assemble large banks of addresses, and sort them by characteristics determined by the type of mail each household receives.

Pollsters would then be able to know which households would be needed to create an accurately weighted sample for the target population. Whether individual polling firms would use their resources to conduct in-person interviews, rely on return-mail polling, or still focus on the telephone is yet to be seen.

It is Riffe’s opinion that the most important provision of the First Amendment is the right of a people to voice their opinions on and to the government. Pollsters, he said, are giving the people a voice. As the tools of communication change, so too must the vehicles of public opinion polling shift.