

**“Political Polls”  
John Zogby (2007)**

**Political Polls: Why We Just Can’t Live Without Them**  
**The use of public opinion polls has increased dramatically**

By John Zogby

*Since the 1960s, the number of public opinion polls has increased dramatically. In this article, polling expert John Zogby discusses the importance of polls, not only in gauging people’s attitudes toward candidates running for office but also in revealing voters’ values and their feelings about current issues. The author is the president of Zogby International, based in Utica, New York, with offices in Washington, Miami, and Dubai. They have been tracking public opinion since 1984 in North America, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.*

I make my living by asking questions and so here are a few: What do early polls mean many months before an election? Do they predict or are they simply barometric readings? With all the talk of global warming, are Americans (and those who follow American elections) victims of “poll-ution” — i.e., too many polls out there in the public domain? Can we do without the public polls? I will try to answer each of these questions.

What do early polls mean many months before an election? Do they predict or are they simply barometric readings?

The best metaphor I can think of for the value of early polls is a person setting a goal to lose weight by November 2008. Should that person merely avoid a scale for months or try to measure progress every so often? Most who try to lose weight are just like political professionals and junkies. They want the information often. Now, of course, the person who is dieting is not assured that his goal will be achieved on the target date, but the progress reports that polls represent will provide arguments for either more effort or the occasional slice of chocolate cake.

Early polls can provide a wealth of data well beyond simply showing which candidates are ahead in the race. What are the issues that are dominant at a moment in time? Will these top issues change and will they have to be addressed? Early polls also portray the overall mood of the public. Are they pleased with the direction the country is heading in or, as we all put it to them, “are things off on the wrong track?” These are very important readings. And polls merely add science to what candidates see and what

crowds feel — contentment, resentment, anger, frustration, confidence — or even despair.

It is important to understand that we pollsters are probing more than one-dimensional feelings or fleeting opinions about things voters may not even understand. Good polling tries to define the values that voters attach to specific issues. Values are not fleeting. Rather, they are ingrained and sacrosanct. And often people can be conflicted about their own values. The same voter can feel that the war in Iraq is going badly because it is causing unnecessary death and destruction — but also care just as deeply that America's honor and integrity are at stake. It is up to the candidates and their professional handlers to craft the right symbols and messages to convince voters to break their own internal conflicts. That is why polling is valuable to help determine the optimum communications message and theme to be emphasized.

Along the same lines, I have learned from three decades as a polling practitioner that majorities can often matter less in political campaigns than intensity of feelings on key issues. Let's examine for a moment the top issues right now in the 2008 presidential race. In overwhelming first place is the war in Iraq. Almost three in five voters list it as the top issue for them. While opposition to the war was mainly among Democrats (more than 80 percent) and many independents (more than 60 percent) in 2004, Republican support back then was just as intense as Democratic opposition. Thus, President Bush found that the war did not hurt him as he linked it to the war on terrorism — something that most voters saw him as better able to handle than his Democratic opponent, Senator John Kerry. But by 2005, Republican conservative support for the war not only became softer, but a solid minority of Libertarian and moderate Republicans became opposed to the president.

The war on terrorism is the second top issue and provides a useful look at the dynamics of public opinion. When Bush was reelected in 2004, he was favored as the one better able to handle this issue, 67 percent to 24 percent over Kerry. By 2005, Democrats were about tied with Republicans in the public's view on their capacity to fight terrorism. But as we move into 2008, the Democrats are not ready to gain on the Republicans on this issue because voters do not have a high intensity of support for the Democrats that can propel them to victory. At least not yet.

In the past few election cycles, the high-intensity issues have been about "God, guns, and gays." But Republicans may be losing their edge because voters are turning to other issues like Iraq and health care, which trigger

insecurity, anger, and frustration — reactions featuring very intense emotions.

What promises to be the intense issue of 2008 is immigration. And here, polling is instructive. Americans oppose illegal immigration, but they believe it is fair to have a path to citizenship for those already in the United States. They want stronger border control, but they oppose the spending of hundreds of millions of dollars on building a fence between the United States and Mexico. However, as with the Iraq war, this issue has not been influenced as much by majorities who support or oppose varying measures, but instead turns on the depth of support or opposition of a relatively small number of voters. Republicans again are in a tough position as they face the issue.

Republican presidential and congressional candidates are caught between the loudest and most conservative voices who oppose any efforts to legalize those now in the country illegally and the growing number of Hispanic voters who are alienated by efforts to build a wall along the southern border. Consider these numbers: Hispanics were 4 percent of 92 million voters in the 1992 election, 5 percent of 95 million voters in 1996, 6 percent of 105 million voters in 2000, and 8.5 percent of 122 million voters in 2004. And as a percentage of the American electorate, they continue to grow at a faster rate than the overall population. When President Bush received 40 percent of the 2004 Hispanic vote (up 5 points from 2000), he was capturing a much larger piece of a much larger pie. As a result of mainly the immigration issue (along with Iraq and the economy), the Republican share of the total vote in the 2006 congressional elections went down to 28 percent. And the Republicans suffered a huge defeat. With early polling in the 2008 election cycle showing they are suffering among Hispanics, Republicans face a tough choice on the immigration issue.

Is there poll-ution?

In the 1960s, there were the Gallup and Harris polling organizations. By the 1970s, the major television networks teamed up with the large newspapers. By 1992, there were still only a few major polls. The reasoning for media and independent polls was clear. They acted as a check against abuse by conniving candidates who could claim to be doing better by simply releasing bogus polls to mislead both the public and potential contributors by establishing a public record of survey results performed by credible, independent sources.

With the explosion of cable news networks and other new media, there has been a proliferation of public polls. There were at least two dozen independent polls in the public domain as of 2006 — and the number is growing. Thus, the real question is whether or not there are too many news outlets and too many polls. Thus far, Americans seem to like both the additional news options and the extra polls. Americans want to feel connected, to know if their own views are in the mainstream or on the fringes, and to see how their candidate is doing among the larger public — beyond their own world of friendships, hairdressers and barbers, convenience stores, family, and neighborhood.

But with the greater number of polls comes some additional responsibilities for pollsters, the public, and the media. Those of us in this profession have an obligation to remind Americans what polls can do — and what they cannot do. We hear all the time how we are “making predictions” each time we publish our findings, when in fact we are only taking a snapshot of a moment in time, getting a meter reading, plotting progress on a scale. Anything can happen between the time a poll is taken and an election is held, even if the poll is taken the day before an election.

Polls are also not perfect. We do not talk to every single person in a designated universe of the population, but instead take a sampling from it. Thus, there is a built-in source of sampling error (though there are other factors that can cause errors as well). Most of us operate within a margin of sampling error of “plus or minus three” in national polling, thus there can be a swing of six points. If Candidate A is receiving 53 percent of the vote in such a poll and Candidate B posts 47 percent, then A can be as high as 56 percent and as low as 50 percent, while B can be as high as 50 percent and as low as 44 percent. In other words, the candidates could be tied. We can tell if an election is close or not close, but we do not predict an outcome, except through hunches and analysis of our numbers. And that is mainly for entertainment, not predictive, purposes.

The public needs to possess a healthy skepticism about polls. They are very useful tools to understand the dynamics of an election, so they should not be dismissed. And generally our work product is very accurate. But in 2000, when my polls (along with those of CBS News) suggested a tiny margin of victory for then-Vice President Al Gore in the popular vote and a few other polls had then-Governor George W. Bush leading by two or three points, we were basically saying the same thing.

Finally, the media — particularly the broadcast media — has to do a better job explaining sampling errors, question wording, and other sources of

possible limitations in polls, while at the same time reporting results within their proper context, i.e, events, speeches, and other factors that might have influenced results while the poll was being taken.

Can we do without the polls?

Well, I certainly cannot. Apparently neither can the professional politicians and political observers. Polls perform an important function of revealing the innermost thoughts, feelings, biases, values, and behaviors of the body politic. I have learned after all these years that individual Americans can be ill-informed, indifferent, and simply wrong, but the American people as a whole are always sufficiently informed and are hardly ever wrong when they answer a poll — or, ultimately, cast a vote.

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

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