The Power of Polls

A primer for generating, analyzing and using poll information.

By Gene Rose

Nearly three-quarters of Americans believe the country would be better off if public officials "paid more attention to public opinion," and 61 percent said the nation would be better off if leaders paid more attention to "polls."

This revealing information from a September 2005 Gallup poll shows that while Americans don't necessarily trust the science of polls—68 percent say the standard scientific practice of sampling 1,000 people can't accurately represent the views of the country—more than half agree that polls generally get the information right.

Some polls have been wrong. The most infamous one predicted Thomas Dewey would defeat Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election. Exit surveys in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections also came under criticism. But, generally, when polls are wrong it's because collection errors were made. The science behind polling keeps improving and, in fact, polls have proved to be a fairly accurate barometer of public opinion.

While polling data often are used to affirm or influence public opinion nationally, their use in statehouses appears to be limited. Legislators spend considerable time trying to convince their colleagues and the public that their views and legislative instruments are the best solutions to public policy issues. There's little evidence that many use polling or polling data to advance their issues, outside of unscientific surveys included in district mailings. Those that do use polling data tend to use it only for reelection purposes.

Policy advocates, on the other hand, are learning to use polling data to show that the public is behind them. In the weeks leading up to the 2007 state legislative sessions, for example, newspaper stories discussed poll results on renewable energy in Montana, education funding in New Hampshire, sin taxes in Wisconsin, civil unions in New Jersey, legislative reform in California, highways in Wyoming, manufacturing in Kentucky and stem cell research in Georgia. Competing interests in Minnesota released polls showing public support and rejection for a new NASCAR track.

James Surowiecki's popular book, The Wisdom of Crowds, explains the value and accuracy of public opinion when it is collected and analyzed properly. The collective wisdom of independent thinkers, he theorizes, often can result in better decisions on nearly any topic. Good polling data can help identify solutions the public would support.

The primary reason legislators and legislators typically don't conduct polling is the cost. National polls by reputable firms will cost a minimum of five figures. Depending on

Use state polling data resources. SurveyUSA posts several state-specific polls that are primarily used by local television stations. The National Council on Public Polls, an association of polling organizations, has a list of members that features organizations with available state polling data, including New Jersey's Eagleton Institute for Public Opinion Research at Rutgers University, Colorado's CIRULI Associates and the Field Research Corporation that takes several California polls. Many state universities and major metropolitan media outlets conduct polls. Save that information for future reference, even if you don't anticipate needing it.

Once you have polling results, analyze them. Look for trends and benchmarks on public opinion on policy issues. After years of seeing crime at the top of Americans' concerns, lawmakers took several steps that resulted in a reduction in crime rates. Determine what the polls are saying about Americans' hopes, dreams and fears. And don't just look for what the public knows, look for areas where their knowledge about an aspect of the issue may be lacking. With this information, you can identify the types of campaigns needed to educate the public.

Consider conducting your own scientific poll. If money is an issue, look for reputable partners that will enhance the validity of your poll. Also, ask polling firms about "piggybacking" questions on a poll they are about to put in the field. Often, this allows you only one or two questions, but with the proper wording, can provide revealing results.

Consider conducting an online poll. Though not scientific, there are benefits to launching an electronic poll to get a snapshot of public opinion in your state or your district. Online services such as SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang offer inexpensive ways to email and analyze surveys. Many organizations report higher return rates on surveys when sent electronically.

Publicize poll results, even if they are not your own. If a released poll supports your legislative position, be sure to publicize this through your website, press release, newsletters, e-mails and broadcast interviews. This is the lesson from advocacy groups who are taking every possible step to influence public opinion.

Learn more about the science of polling. The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut has an informative website with information on the fundamentals of polling and how to analyze polling data. Several books have been written on the subject, including Polling for Dummies. You'll want to become more familiar with terms such as margin of error, cross-tabs, probability sampling, sample size and variables. For the truly dedicated, Roper offers data from more than 30 years of national surveys that can be collected and analyzed.

Consider focus groups. Though not as scientific as polling, focus groups are another way for policymakers to get valuable insight into public opinion. Businesses that specialize in identifying a cross-sampling of citizens or people who meet a pre-determined profile can be brought together and, with a knowledgeable facilitator, probe participants on the reasons for their opinions and the types of words and messages that resonate with the public.

Knowing how the public feels about issues, what their knowledge level is and where education efforts need to be made can be a powerful tool in getting constituents to get behind your legislation.

Jim Collins, the author of Good to Great encourages his audiences to make “data-driven decisions.” The data gathered by polls can help to not only advance good ideas, but also to develop them.