

Pollsters Under Attack: 2004 Election Incivility and its Consequences

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And

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Abstract

The 2004 election was remarkable for a number of reasons, including the harsh, personal attacks on a number of media pollsters. The idea of “killing the messenger” has been around long enough for the phenomenon to have its own name, but it appears to have intensified much more than in the past. The paper details the experiences of two polls and their pollsters, one national and one statewide. These attacks are part of a growing practice of trying to mitigate perceived damage by any message in the political market place. The paper suggests that while there are positive effects from these developments, including heightened awareness among voters of polling methods, negative effects can damage the credibility of specific polls and their sponsors, as well as the profession in general, including market and other public opinion research. The paper ends with a call for researchers to be more open with their methods and measures, and to strongly defend properly done research against critics; for journalists to be more discerning in evaluating poll criticisms before publishing them; and for professional organizations to help the public better understand polling, market research and other public opinion research and their benefits to society.

Americans always have been fascinated with numbers, especially in elections. It was the early 1800s in Bertie County, North Carolina. A poll of militiamen at a company muster found a huge lead for Andrew Jackson over Georgian William H. Crawford in the early days of the 1824 presidential election. The findings made their way into Fayetteville's *Carolina Observer*. It was one of many such tavern, muster or other straw polls in public places that newspapers then – as now – report. And just as now, it drew the criticism of those who thought their candidate was getting short shrift. A Crawford backer complained in print “that the polls were rigged.” (Littlewood, 1998.)

Now, things have changed. Rather than complaining that drunken tavern goers were not representative, as Crawford did in the 1820s about some of those musters, partisans no longer limit themselves to complaining about polls and their methodologies when they perceive the findings to be unfavorable to their candidate. Now they've begun attacking – often in personal, mean-spirited ways – those who conduct media polls, calling into question their professional training, competence, ethics and objectivity. The 2004 presidential election carried many examples of this trend. This article profiles two of those, one at the national and one at the state level; it suggests that these attacks have potentially serious implications for the profession of public opinion research and outlines several potential steps that can be taken to deal with this phenomenon in future elections.

In 2004 these attacks were disseminated outside usual news channels – including the use of web logs, or “blogs,” Internet postings, and paid advertising. In other instances, the attacks were picked up and incorporated into normal news coverage of the campaign, sometimes uncritically.

The increasing tendency in recent years for horse-race polls and pollsters to come under scrutiny in a preelection environment is part of a more general pattern in which those involved in campaigns ramp up the attack on almost any message that can be perceived as deleterious to a candidate's campaign fortunes. The developing conventional wisdom appears to be that no negative message should be left untouched: Everything potentially harmful should be quickly countered in the hopes that the message is tainted or discredited so that enough doubt sown to limit the message's impact.

The perceived need to control messages and images in the political market place may have first begun in strength when American campaigns began using more of a marketing model to get candidates elected, a shift from campaigns based on party machinery and grassroots effort.

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Newman (1994) cites the Dwight D. Eisenhower campaign's use of television as the nascent use of marketing to get a candidate's message out to voters. Such a marketing model, Newman says, came into full use in 1992 with the Bill Clinton campaign.

The Gallup Poll was introduced to this new world in 1992, when polling just a week or two before the election showed George H.W. Bush closing the gap with challenger Bill Clinton (with Ross Perot in a strong third place). The now famous "Clinton war room" moved quickly into gear, challenging and questioning methodological details of Gallup's likely voter procedures, thus muddying the waters and, from the Democrats' perspective, avoiding what they obviously feared would be a last minute meltdown in Clinton's support.

If 1992 marked the year when a presidential campaign first used a fully-developed marketing approach to get a candidate elected, then the dawn of the new century marked the time when campaigns began fine tuning the public relations portion of the marketing mix to try to control any bit of message reaching the targeted consumer – news reporters and likely voters. Some of that effort has resulted in these personal and professional attacks on survey researchers themselves.

Researchers also have seen the rise of the influence of secondary groups, such as MoveOn.org and a swift boat veteran's organization,¹ who have large war chests and are able to spend money quickly to push messages out. The rise of the Internet obviously makes the rapid dissemination of a specific message much easier – particularly to groups of individuals with strong ideological or partisan views. Thus, the information flow often bypasses the conventional or "mainstream" media through blogs and other web sites that spread messages in spider web fashion within hours or days.

Attacks on the motivations and alleged biases of pollsters have mirrored an accelerated level of criticism of the so-called "mainstream media" in recent years. These attacks are aimed not so much at the specifics of any given news story, but rather are more general attacks on motivations and underlying orientations of news organizations regardless of the story covered. Many in traditional news organizations and those who study the mass media have a growing concern that these attacks will lead the general public to doubt the veracity of news reports carried in any general or mainstream news outlet. There is evidence that politically oriented Americans already

¹ See, for example, <http://www.swiftvets.com/index.php>.

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seek news from radio, television, print and Internet outlets seemingly compatible with their pre-existing orientation (Pew 2004), and the concern is that this trend may accelerate in the years ahead.

The evidence relating to this postulated process is still less than straightforward. Surveys conducted over time suggest that Americans have been suspicious of bias in mainstream media for many years, predating the more recently accelerated level of criticism. But the danger is that polling will begin to be considered in the same way – that partisans on all sides will begin to believe in “their” side’s polls and begin to doubt the veracity of neutral polls conducted by nonpartisan pollsters and for neutral news organizations.

One doesn’t have to look far for examples. There are two situations from the 2004 election in which the underlying motivations and orientations of professional pollsters were called into question.

The Minnesota Poll

The Minnesota Poll has been the focus of partisan attacks for years because of its association with the Twin Cities’ newspaper, the *Star Tribune*, whose editorial pages have long represented ideas and programs associated with the Democratic Party. In 2002, for example, the Independence Party of Minnesota² filed a complaint with the Minnesota News Council on the Friday before the general election, saying that the Minnesota Poll’s methodology was flawed, its reporting for a poll story in that week’s newspaper was inaccurate, and that its candidate had suffered because of those faults. (Minnesota is one of the few states that have a news council, which adjudicates citizen complaints about media fairness.) Party officials later amended the complaint to focus only on the accuracy of the reporting, and finally dropped the complaint.

But 2004 was a particular caustic year. Political observers will remember that Richard Clarke’s criticism of President George W. Bush dominated the news coverage for a few days in March, and it coincided with the fieldwork dates of the year’s first Minnesota Poll to address campaign politics. That poll found John Kerry with a 12-point lead in the state. Those findings set

² The Independence Party is a “major” party under Minnesota law. The Minnesota News Council is a media-sponsored organization that serves to settle disputes of fairness and accuracy between citizens or other non-news organizations and news organizations. It is one of the few news councils in the U.S. For more information, see: <http://www.news-council.org/main.html>

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the stage for a long summer and fall of criticism and protests by Republicans and conservative bloggers against the *Star Tribune*, the Minnesota Poll, and its director.

In the summer, the Republican editor of *Politics in Minnesota*, a bi-partisan political newsletter in the state, published conservatives' criticism that the poll was biased toward Democrats. In a later edition, after going over the historical data from the poll's archives, that editor conceded that there was a lot of evidence that showed a conservative shift in the state late in the election, with tracking polls during the few days just before election proving to be closer to the election results, rather than seeing error and bias that the critics cited (*Politics in Minnesota*, 2004).

In September 2004, the Minnesota Republican Party chair called on the newspaper's publisher to fire the poll director, one of this article's authors (Brunswick and Lopez 2004). When the newspaper did not, he called on the newspaper to suspend polling until after the election. The newspaper responded by saying it would not let any political party dictate its news judgment or its polling (Lopez 2004). Also in September, urged on by bloggers, Republicans gathered outside the Star Tribune building waving signs calling for accurate polls as TV cameras rolled. Protesters pounded on windows, accosted employees, and shouted "Hey, Hey! Ho, Ho! Rob Daves has got to go!"; they dispersed when the cameras left. The newspaper dutifully covered it as news, running the news article on the inside with a photo of protesters displaying signs demanding polling accuracy (Olson, 2004).

In October, the Minnesota News Council held a public forum, which originally had been an outgrowth of the 2002 complaint. The council director asked the Minnesota Poll director to plan the forum so that the state's journalists would better understand polls and do a better job of poll reporting. However, the council failed to publicize it widely; only partisans and members of a few news organizations were present. The forum turned into a bashing session of the newspaper, the Minnesota Poll and its director.

During the campaign, many bloggers turned the tenor to even more of a "smash-mouth" style, which is how *Washington Post* reporter Richard Morin (2004) characterized the critics' tone. They mounted e-mail campaigns that resulted in vile – even scatological – attacks aimed at the poll's director. The attacks drew many kinds of reactions. Journalist colleagues offered support that came from those who had run similar gauntlets in their careers. Many colleagues in the academy were aghast. Acquaintances in civic organizations greeted the poll director with suspicion,

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asking if he really stooped to such actions. Much of the last two months before election day was spent defending the poll's methodology, and his own and his profession's ethics and integrity in a variety of venues, including the media, speeches to social and civic groups, and university classes. In November the Minnesota Poll's last poll before the election, published online on Monday night and in the Election Day newspaper, showed John Kerry with a 4-point lead over President Bush with 8 percent undecided; Kerry won the state by 3.5 percentage points. There was no evidence of partisan bias, and a census of state polls conducted later showed the Minnesota Poll to be one of the most accurate in the nation.

The Gallup Poll

The Gallup poll became the target of an extraordinary attack based on a full-page ad in the New York Times published on September 28, 2004. The ad was sponsored by an advocacy group associated with support for the Democratic campaign of John Kerry. The ad contained a number of points, two of which were: 1) The Gallup Poll's pre-election estimates were slanted towards George W. Bush, and 2) This slant was the result of both faulty "likely voter" methodology and also the result of deliberate bias on the part of Gallup – as evidenced by retired Gallup co-chairman George H. Gallup Jr.'s personal religious beliefs and interest in survey research on religion.

The specific allegations in the ad relating to George Gallup Jr. were based on the technique of guilt by innuendo and implied causal association. There was no discussion in the ad copy of the rationale for asserting that an individual's personal religious views could or would have a direct effect on the results of a highly-scrutinized and open poll conducted with two major media partners, and no evidence to support the allegation. Indeed, George H. Gallup Jr. had no direct involvement in the Gallup Poll's election polling for years, and at the time of the ad, he was in fact retired. Many individuals and groups decried the use of these tactics, assuming that similar attacks in the future could list the religious views of editors, reporters, producers and news anchors at media outlets and imply that these personal views in some ways dictated news coverage.

As was the case with the Minnesota Poll, Gallup's last poll conducted before the election was extremely accurate, showing George W. Bush with a two-point lead over John Kerry with 3 percent undecided; Bush's won by 2.5 points in the popular vote. There was no evidence of a Republican or any other kind of bias.

But, as is often the case in terms of negative advertisements and accusations, the veracity of the contents of the attack ad did not matter as long as the superficial accusations were widely distributed. There were some news stories that critically evaluated the substance of the ad, but in other instances only the accusations in the ad made it through to the consciousness of average citizens. Some portion of those reading the ad, or those seeing references to it on websites and in blogs, or hearing about it on radio talk shows, presumably made little attempt to verify the allegations but simply recorded the fact that Gallup Polls showing George W. Bush ahead were to be doubted. The editor of Gallup Poll (one of this article's authors) was interviewed by many print, television and radio reporters after the ad appeared, and often was directly confronted with questions assuming that the allegations about Gallup bias were factual and correct. Although Gallup made every effort to respond with specific details on poll methodology and to decry the references to the religious beliefs of George Gallup, Jr., it was obvious that the message contained in the ad was having an impact – no doubt just as the ad's sponsors had hoped.

(It is interesting that the rationale behind spending the \$146,000 in advertising³ was based on questionable assumptions. The ad's sponsors assumed that polls showing John Kerry behind were having a negative effect on his campaign. This assumption of a bandwagon effect in and of itself is highly debatable; there is probably as much evidence suggesting that having a candidate down in pre-election polls serves as a positive motivator as there is evidence that pre-election polls showing a candidate down serve as a negative drag on campaign momentum [cf. Lavrakas, Holley, and Miller, 1991]).

It appeared that a line had been crossed with this particular ad attacking Gallup. The ad made assertions about poll methodology that were inaccurate but of course impossible to refute in the same environment in which the ad appeared. More importantly, the ad copy's references to the personal religious views of the (retired) son of Gallup's founder left readers with what the ad's sponsors presumably hoped would be the inference that there must somehow be a connection between the two – without substantiating evidence or rationale.

Many observers may believe that the increased level of attack and scrutiny on polls is solely a result of the expanded impact of blogs, but the major attacks on the authors' polls in 2004 often

³ According to the NY Times Display Advertising Department, the ad would cost \$146,638.80 in July, 2005. The Times would not divulge how much the ad cost MoveOn.org in September, 2004.

originated in more prosaic sources. Still, it was our experience that once a critical attack was launched in more conventional or mainstream media in 2004, informal websites and blogs were effective viral mechanisms for spreading that same message. The 2004 experiences suggest that this spread can happen quickly and have significant impact. Of course, the exact extent of that impact is difficult to quantify; blogs typically “preach to the choir” of readers who are already predisposed to one perspective or the other.⁴

These highly visible attacks on polls in 2004 were just the tip of the iceberg. The advent of e-mail has allowed most public pollsters to receive many more comments than has been the case in the past. Gallup, the Minnesota Poll, and other national polls such as the New York Times/CBS poll, the Los Angeles Time Poll, and the ABC/Washington Post regularly received e-mails (and other forms of communication) from both sides of the ideological spectrum. These communications criticized specific polls whose results were inconsistent with the e-mailer’s personal ideological or partisan beliefs. Many of these criticisms were similar, and their origin could be traced to a posting on a particular website by partisan commentators. Nevertheless, the fact that average citizens take the time to send e mails criticizing pollsters’ methods and alleging biases certainly suggests that these citizens are not simply evaluating poll results as accurate, scientific estimates of where the population stands, but rather tending to dismiss and discredit the results. In essence, the pattern has moved to a point where individuals are more likely to shoot the polling messenger rather than bemoaning the message per se.

In summary, there has been an apparent increase in appears to include attacks on pollsters which are:

1. Increasingly critical of the mechanics of polling;
2. Increasingly critical of the motivations of pollsters;
3. Increasingly reflective of a process by which non-researchers, including bloggers, are trying to take command of the criticisms as self-appointed (yet untrained) experts on question wording and other methodological aspects of polling.

Long-Term Results of These Attacks

⁴ Cf., <http://www.theleftcoaster.com/archives/002806.html>.

By no means are all criticisms of pre-election polls illegitimate. Likely voter models, ways in which ballot questions are asked, placement within a questionnaire, explicit listing of third party candidates, association of candidates with their parties, order effects, sampling methods, and sample coverage issues are all fair game for informed discussion. Indeed, the quasi-scientific model by which polling operates assumes a constant process of critical evaluation of research procedures and results (Mitofsky and Edelman 1995).

As an example, there was a great deal of discussion in the 2004 campaign of coverage issues in pre-election polls – most particularly relating to impact of cell phone-only households. Much of this discussion was important and valuable. In responding to these questions and criticisms, pollsters almost certainly did more research on the implications of coverage issues and response-rate issues than they would have otherwise. Pollsters responded with a barrage of commentary and discussion of their methods, in the process reviewing their own procedures and also educating the public more than they would have otherwise. By the time of the election, pollsters were almost certainly more sensitive to coverage issues than would have been the case if there had been no critical discussion, the public was better informed on this crucial issue than they might have been otherwise, and the overall quality of sampling may have been improved.

In short, increased scrutiny of polling methods and analysis has positive elements. It is perhaps a good thing that the public no longer simply is content to leave polling as a poorly understood, arcane sorcerer's art. Many pollsters themselves believe that there are too many poorly executed polls using short-cut methods that should not get equal consideration as more costly, legitimate polls. There are good reasons why the public should scrutinize polls and ask questions about response rates, question wording, likely voter models, sample procedures and the more general question of why polls get different results even when taken at the same time (cf. Traugott and Lavrakas, 2004).

Indeed, it seems likely that as a result of more intense partisan scrutiny of polls:

1. Journalists may be bending over backwards to be more careful in reporting polls;
2. Researchers are more likely to be minding their methodological p's and q's;
3. Researchers continue to actively reevaluate and refine likely voter and other poll methodologies (e.g., Daves and Warden, 1995; Visser and Krosnick, 2000).

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There is an analogy here to medical research. Patients were much more likely in the past to blindly accept without questioning their doctor's diagnoses, recommendations for medical action and prescriptions. It has become clear in recent years that in many situations medical advice has been misguided and out of date, that common procedures and prescriptions may have negative iatrogenic effects, and that the level of relevant medical knowledge varies widely across medical professionals. Patients, in large part fueled by the Internet, now often do their own research, and physicians and other health care professionals find themselves in the position of having their word much more closely scrutinized and questioned than has been the case in the past. While some doctors resent this intrusion into their heretofore-unquestioned professional domain, the net impact is probably an increase in positive patient outcomes. Similarly, increased user scrutiny of polling procedures and poll reports is probably a net positive for the dissemination of accurate survey research information.

(Also, the fact that polls are considered important enough to be attacked in the first place represents presumably good news for public opinion pollsters. An alternative situation in which polls were ignored might signify a worse state of events for those involved in the polling industry. Critics obviously think that polls matter.)

But the specific type of criticism detailed in this paper – ad hominem attacks on the motivations and biases of polling professionals -- does not have positive effects for the polling industry. This would be analogous to patients beginning to discredit the motivation of their doctors and hospitals, accusing them of deliberately giving misleading diagnoses, prescribing the wrong medications, and performing unneeded operations because of some preexisting need to sacrifice the canons of the science of medicine for a greater and more evil purpose. These types of criticisms cannot be easily addressed because they don't dispute specific points but rather make broad inferences that the researchers involved somehow slant or (mysteriously) "adjust" polling numbers to reflect their pre-existing biases.

The effect of these criticisms can be increasingly injurious in the long run. If attacks on the motives and purposes of professional pollsters continue without vigorous rebuttal from pollsters and the polling industry, they contain the potential for general – if gradual – erosion in the credibility and legitimacy of the industry as a whole. This includes all survey and market opinion researchers (Of course, such a process can always come back to haunt those who propagate it when the results of polls more favorable to their candidate are also doubted.)

In fact, some qualitative research conducted before the 2004 election seems to confirm this lack of confidence. Rund and Belden (2004) reported that public opinion researchers who call themselves pollsters rank lower with the general public than market researchers or researchers in general. Doubt cast on the integrity of specific pollsters, arguably, can begin to increase the chances of doubt being cast on all pollsters. There is also the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts in which the lowered credibility of polls could lead to lower response rates, which in turn would in reality begin to whittle away at the scientific accuracy of polls' representation of the views of the underlying population.

If the public begins to assume there is something wrong with the polling process when results are released that they (the public) do not like, then the very positive function that publicly released polls can play in a democratic society may become seriously eroded. There is also the issue of *partisan* polls that either are released or leaked to the public via the press. While most partisan pollsters conduct professional polls for their clients, they have perhaps natural reasons for selective leaking of their results to the public. If partisan pollsters increasingly become involved in the process of leaking poll results favorable to their clients, and issuing blanket criticisms of polls that show particular candidates in losing positions, this too could increase perceptions that polling is a partisan, non-scientific effort used to push specific candidates or agendas.

Finally, it's clear that the effect on public discourse from these public and acrimonious criticisms also includes not only effects on the polling profession per se but can further polarize the electorate, create a more hostile (uncivil) public sphere, and increase distrust of the media and damage media credibility.

Prescriptions and Proscriptions

A key focus going forward is the development of a specific strategy for dealing with the illegitimate attacks on the legitimacy and motivations of public opinions pollsters in a preelection environment.

Perhaps most importantly, researchers and those who report polls results must be more aggressive in reducing the black box element of polling by delineating the mechanics of polling so that its process becomes better known and better understood. There is no substitute for truth in a contentious environment. It can be assumed that the more the public knows about the careful and scientific procedures used by pollsters today, the more likely they will be to evaluate polls on

legitimate criteria and the less likely they will be to accept random, vague, unsubstantiated criticisms. As Janet Elder, director of polling at the New York Times says: “The best thing for the polling community to do is to get their own message out, to educate the public about what polls are and are not so that voters can draw their own conclusions” (Elder, 2005).

This already is the goal of the National Council on Public Polls, which focuses on disclosure of methods and measures, and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), which has long required members to agree to high standards of disclosure and ethics. However, many practitioners are not members of these groups, and often will not be forthright in disclosing key methods, especially likely voter modeling, citing client privilege.

The best guideline here is provided by the traditional scientific model. Scientists in theory operate in an environment in which all aspects of their procedures and results are open to scrutiny, inviting challenges and encouraging replicability. Pollsters – especially those in campaigns and who are hired by smaller news organizations – have been less open in some situations to the idea of revealing extensive details about their methods, in part for competitive reasons, and in part out of concern that they would not be properly understood by the public. That should change. The best antidote to criticism, as noted, is truth – inviting critics to lodge specific complaints about specific aspects of the research process, rather than the broad, ad hominem attacks seen in 2004.

Journalists too need to do a better job of reporting on polls and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. News organizations must put more emphasis on evaluating the basis for critical claims about pollsters rather than simply assuming that journalistic duty is done as long as journalists provide sources or report criticisms with attribution. Journalists would not usually report medical news or criticism of medical institutions or medical professionals without some effort to evaluate the source of that criticism. In similar fashion, journalists need to evaluate criticisms of polls before reporting them. Attribution of source (or even following the time-honored expedient of trolling for a contradictory source) does not exonerate the journalist from the responsibility of evaluating the validity of what is printed, particularly when the readers or viewers cannot perform such evaluation themselves. One particularly damaging practice is when journalists allow a source to get away with commenting only that the poll in question has “a bad sample,” which occurred in the Minnesota case (Hotakainen, 2004) or as occurred when a Los Angeles Times poll was criticized as having a “bad sample” by Bush campaign operatives in early 2004 (Pinkus, 2005).

But these burdens cannot be left only to journalists, who unfortunately often don't have the expertise or the time to drill into the methodological details. Professional organizations can do more, too (cf. Lavrakas and Traugott 2000).

Several organizations already are examining ways to help combat the drop in confidence about polls and the respectability of their practitioners. For example, the Market Research Association has a nascent effort begun to certify researchers.⁵ AAPOR has begun an education program. The authors do not necessarily endorse this particular process; this is cited only as an example of efforts currently underway aimed currently at journalists and elites, to help them better understand how polls and pollsters work. Certainly the efforts to educate respondents and the public by the MRA and the Council of Survey Research Organizations are another step in the right direction. And AAPOR's work on response rates in the past decade has enabled researchers to understand that low response rates alone do not necessarily affect survey accuracy to the extent that the critics cite.

Researchers themselves should not be silent when they are attacked. They should correct erroneous information put out by critics, and press for substantiation for criticisms that rely only on vague claims of bias. Researchers should at the same time respond quickly and fairly to criticisms that are based on legitimate questions about methodological procedures or reporting issues. Public opinion researchers should in essence differentiate between two types of poll scrutiny – welcoming scientifically based discussion of polling methods and procedures while at the same time denouncing unsubstantiated allegations of bias or deliberate malfeasance. Professional organizations should help elites and the general public understand the benefits that public opinion research provides. Finally, partisan critics – from professional political operatives to citizen bloggers – should accept responsibility for their actions, and commit at the very least to a more civil discourse. Perhaps that could begin with apologies when critics are wrong, as many were in the 2004 election.

⁵ See <http://www.mra-net.org/certification/index.cfm>

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