



DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

PART THREE EXPLORE CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGNS

UP AND DOWN: THE INEXACT SCIENCE OF POLLING

During a campaign season, it is impossible to pick up a newspaper, turn on a television or radio, or surf the Internet without seeing or hearing the latest poll. Polls are a fact of life in politics, but how much do we know about polls and how much should we trust their results? The following article gives background on polls and tips on how to be good consumers of their findings.

Can polls be trusted in the first place? And if they are reliable indicators of public opinion, why do they vary so much? Polling is still an inexact science subject to error as well as manipulation. Yet, when they are conducted properly, polls produce a reasonable approximation of where an election race stands at a given time.

Time, however, is often the key wild card. People's opinions may change often, particularly if they lack a strong bond to a party or candidate. Polls can also vary because of the way a sample is chosen, the wording and order of questions, even the time of day respondents are contacted.

"You have to look at several polls over a period of time and average them," says Karlyn Bowman, polling analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. That's what campaign strategists do when tracking the

media polls and that's what they say voters should do as well.

Historically, presidential polls have had a remarkably accurate track record of predicting the winners: The leader on Labor Day is the victor in November. The only recent exception was in 1980, when many polls showed Reagan and President Carter virtually tied in early September. Reagan went on to win the election by 10 points.

Like them or not, polls are a fixture of the political process. USA Today Executive Editor Bob Dubill says, "People are curious about election campaigns. Everyone--journalists, politicians, campaign operatives and the public at large-- wants to know who is leading, what's changed and why. Reporters can't interview everybody to find out. But scientifically drawn and conducted polls can take the pulse of the public and provide a sharp snapshot of where the race is at any given time."

Beyond the "horse race" question that gets most of the attention, media polls also gauge the mood of voters and their stand on issues. Dubill adds, "Journalistically, we would be remiss if we didn't sample the public attitudes," he says. "Polls are the best way we can allow the public to have its say. In a democracy, polls are news."



MEDIA LITERACY

As Election Day nears political ads are popping up everywhere. Some ads introduce a candidate by telling who they are and why they are running for office. Others tell the public why they should vote for – or not vote for – a particular candidate. Studies show that most voters get nearly all of their information about political candidates from advertising. Studies also show that while voters don't like attack ads, negative ads work. For this reason it is important to critically evaluate the ads you see.

Don't always believe what you see. Ads are a way for campaigns to communicate what they want you to hear so that you will vote for their candidate. The images, music and words are carefully chosen to leave an impression that will sway your vote.

Be careful of tricky wording. Candidates will almost always use carefully chosen words to sway your vote. For example, "defending America" and "the invasion of Iraq" are two ways of describing the war in Iraq. One sounds positive and one sounds negative.

Music and images in ads. Music and visual images affect our feelings in a subtle but important way. TV and radio ads will have background music that is intended to make the featured candidate seem good or bad. A positive ad will gen-

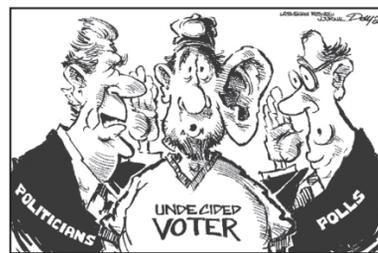
erally have beautiful images and upbeat or sweet music that leaves one feeling good. A negative ad might include black and white footage and ominous sounding music that is designed to make the viewer concerned.

Make sure you check the facts. Candidates often make statements that are misleading or not strictly true as has been the case with candidates for governor Brian Dubie and Peter Shumlin. The Burlington Free Press recently published an article analyzing such statements – see this link: <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2010101011010>. The Free Press refutes Dubie's claim that Shumlin said he would lay off 300 Vermont Corrections Department workers. They also question Shumlin's assertion that a Vermont family of four spends \$32,000 in health coverage. The article can help you read between the lines. It is important to look beyond candidates' assertions and get the facts!

Beware of campaign slogans In addition, campaigns use slogans to help define their candidate. For example, Brian Dubie's slogan is "Pure Vermont", and Peter Shumlin's is "Leadership for a strong Vermont". Each slogan is designed to convey a message to voters but the slogans are merely sound bites. It is important and look past slogans and get the facts!

Dig through Twitter for facts. Today's candidates use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter as yet another civic platform. While these sites may be informative and up-to-date, they are still places for campaign ads and catchy slogans. Keep in mind that these networking sites are carefully monitored by candidates and are yet another medium for political strategy. However, they are still valuable resources- as long as you check the facts!

Where to go to research candidates and check the facts. You can get the facts by reading the newspaper and news magazines' in depth coverage of candidates and campaigns. Visit candidates' campaign websites and nonpartisan websites designed to give voters information about the candidates in their own words. The Secretary of State publishes a candidate information guide that can be viewed at <http://vermont-elections.org/elections1/2010CandWebSites.htm>



DID YOU KNOW?

Over 50% of political television ads are negative, meaning they verbally attack an opponent.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Should candidates be allowed to use negative ads when campaigning? Visit VermontVotesforKids.com/vtvotes/dia.shtml to answer.

TALK BACK

Since the youth voter turnout is so low, should the voting age be raised?

50% NO 50% YES

IMAGE MATTERS: DIGGING INTO CAMPAIGN ADS

Political campaign ads are carefully crafted to create impressions of the candidate or his or her opponents. Join with classmates or your family to become critical sleuths by uncovering some of the persuasive visual tricks and techniques ad creators use.

As you look at campaign ads on TV or in print, ask, What do the creators want viewers to think or feel about the candidate (or opponent) and how do they convey that? Delve into the details by asking yourselves these questions and discussing what each strategy "says" about the candidate:

- What is the location (for example, a hometown senior center or an executive desk)?
- What facial emotions are portrayed (adoring supporters or fearful crime victim)?
- What props or symbols are used (a flag, a polluted river, family members)?
- How are printed words used (large blocks of text stamped over images)?
- What clothing is featured (rolled-up shirt sleeves, military uniform, or business suit)?
- Did your ads provide more substance or image? Which do you think is more important?
- What fears or concerns do the images appeal to (unemployment line)?

(Note: If you can videotape some ads, look at each 3 times: with sound only, with image but no sound, with both sound and image. What new techniques do you notice each time?)

WEB CONNECTIONS

The Internet is full of information on candidates and issues. However, it can be difficult to determine the source and quality of information on many sites. To help you make good use of this valuable resource, here are sites with non-partisan information.

www.sec.state.vt.us

The "Elections" tab on the Web site for the Secretary of State's Office identifies candidates for elected office in Vermont.

www.vote-smart.org

An excellent site for issue-oriented information on candidates.

www.lwvofvt.org

The League of Women Voters of Vermont Web site provides valuable information on Vermont elections, non-partisan resources to evaluate candidates, links to the candidates' official websites and a non-partisan voters guide.

www.publicagenda.org

This site provides balanced educational material on key policy issues as well as public opinion polls.