

CAUTION: 10 THINGS TO BE AWARE OF IN USING POLLING TO GUIDE MESSAGES

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Polling and other public opinion research is often the go-to tool for guiding messages and communication in issue campaigns. But polls are often misused and the message advice from pollsters can easily do disservice to winning campaigns and to advancing progressive values and core beliefs.

Here are 10 big cautions you should be aware of in using polling to inform messages for issue campaigns.

1 - Just because a message polls the highest doesn't mean it's the best message

The first thing to understand is that just because a message polls higher than other messages, that doesn't mean it's the strongest campaign message. The first question to ask is: who the message poll well with? The second is whether the differences between messages are statistically significant?

2 - Who's the audience? Mobilize the mobilizables.

Unlike elections, issue campaigns are not won by majorities. Issue campaigns are won by constituents organized to put enough pressure on legislators that they will do what the constituents want. Your message first and foremost must motivate activists to take action, including grassroots lobbying, social media activism and joining in rallies and protests.

What this means is that polls should identify and report on your base - people who share your values on this issue and other issues. You'll want to choose messages that do well with base voters.

3 – Who's the audience? Persuade the persuadables.

To build more support for an issue, we need to persuade the persuadables. It's also important to remember that the way we make long term change is by moving more people in the middle towards our values and worldview.

Polls should identify and report separately on people who are not firmly in your base and those who also are not firmly in the "opposition." The messages you want will score well with base and persuadables.

4 – Who's the audience? Alienating the opposition.

One reason that some questions poll higher is that by including progressive and conservative values in a message, more people agree. But that may not actually be helpful to winning and can be self-defeating over time.

Here are the problems with using a message that picks up support from the opposition:

- ✓ It usually comes at a cost of support from the people you most care about, the base.
- ✓ It confuses the middle. Our goal over time is to move the middle, by reinforcing the strength of progressive ideas. We can't do that if we repeat conservative messages.
- ✓ The opposition may agree with the message but that doesn't mean they will actually change their issue position. For example, strong conservatives will agree that there is too much money in politics but they still will not support public financing of elections; that contradicts their core beliefs on government and taxation.

It's often surprising what will alienate the opposition. For example, Lake Research Partners, working with Anat Shenker Osorio, [found](#) that the opposition actually reacts negatively to the statement, "Every working parent should get paid enough to care for their kids and set them off toward a great future." That's a perfect example of a powerful message that will appeal to the base and middle and alienate the opposition.

It is possible for strong messages to be supported by the opposition – particularly if they don't violate rule 10 below. But don't ever reject a message that does well with the base and swing because it scores poorly with opponents. That's usually a sign it's a good message for you.

For more on understanding the theory of change behind polling audiences read this great blog post "[Please All and You'll Please None](#)" by Anat Shenker Osorio and Celinda Lake.

5 - Small differences are often just that – small and insignificant

How often have you seen responses to different messages listed by rank order, with pollsters emphasizing the messages that poll the highest. A lot of the time, the difference is just one or two percentage points. But statistically, there is often little or no difference.

Most polls have a margin of error of between plus or minus 3% to 5%. Which means that if one question gets 65% and another 62%, the poll cannot say that there is a reliable difference between the preference of the general population. (Actually, since it's plus or minus 3%, a difference of 6% points is not reliable.)

And when you get to smaller groups within a poll – for instance base voters or demographic groups – the point spread that is reliable is much bigger.

So when a pollster advises you to select one message because it polls higher – be sure it's a real difference.

6 – Changes in wording but no changes in meaning

It is common to get different poll results by changing one word. For instance, one poll found that "*improving* wages" polled a little higher than "*raising* wages." But they both polled well and the difference was not large. And as with any message, you should always check which groups it polled better with.

When it actually comes to choosing a word in your messaging, it may be awkward to use one term, instead of another. Unless you've got strong evidence that one is better than the other, you can use a number of words that convey the meaning in the actual messages you are using.

7 – Changes in wording with real changes in meaning.

On the other hand, there are times that word changes or phrases are meaningful or can help in change attitudes.

For example, when we describe inequality as a “gap” between the rich and poor, people are less likely to believe government can make a difference. But when we talk about “the economy being out of balance” between the rich and poor, people are more likely to think government can take effective action. The underlying reason is that a gap is natural while an imbalance can be fixed.

We actually don’t need poll results to inform us about many word choices. If we understand what a work means, including the images it creates, we can choose words that more closely convey our worldview.

Remember, one of the most important elements in making an idea popular is familiarity through repetition. So we should choose words that convey our worldview and repeat them over and over again; they will become more popular.

8 – “And” is often better than “or.”

Pollsters often creates false binaries. My favorite example is testing whether “working families” or “middle-class” is a more popular term. Both are popular but they convey different images and ideas. While a pollster is likely recommend using the one that polls higher, your most powerful messages should use both. Here’s an example: “Working families and the middle class are having a tougher time than ever making ends meet.”

Another way that pollsters create false binaries is in testing alternative ideas or frames behind a message. For example, there are two basic progressive arguments for raising the minimum wage. One is the moral argument – *working people should earn enough to meet the basics*. The other is the economic argument – *working people will spend their higher wages in their communities*.

When pollsters measure which message tests higher, it’s always the moral argument. But the moral argument doesn’t address the main opposition argument, that raising the minimum wage kills jobs.

Through an innovative [polling project](#) that I worked on with Topos Partnership, we found that the strongest message combined the moral and economic: *When we raise the minimum wage so working people can meet the basics, their spending boosts the economy*. That message was particularly important in the face of opposition attacks.

It’s almost always possible to easily combine message ideas in one more powerful message, rather than having to choose between two or more effective messages.

9 – Taking false comfort from positive polling

Most polls test your message against the opposition message. And in many cases, your message will come out on top. But don’t take too much comfort from that. In a real campaign, the size of the megaphone is more important than the message.

To find the most effective messages, you should stress test them, by simulating what happens if the opposition gets its message out early and often. Your goal should be to identify messages that do the best job under assault.

10 – Test and Tell Your Story – Not the Opposition’s

I’m ending with my golden rule for messages – don’t use a message that includes the opposition’s values and worldview. Making change requires changing worldview, winning the contest of values and ideas. And while you may pick up a few points in a message, we shoot ourselves in the foot when we repeat the opposition’s message.

Pollsters will often recommend using messages that include the opposition’s arguments as a way to respond to their messages. One theory is that by acknowledging the validity of opposition arguments you can more easily move people in the middle to support your counter position.

But you don’t have to do this to win. First, as we explained in point 2, repeating the opposition argument risks alienating your base.

Second, it’s always possible to write a popular message that makes your case based on your values and worldview. It may take some creativity and effort, but you can do it.

It is possible that the message you come up with won’t test quite as well overall as another message. But if you’ve got this far in this blog, you’ll know why that might not really be true (point 5) and isn’t what matters anyway (points 2-4).

In conclusion, polling and other public opinion research can be a valuable tool for making change. But pollsters have their own biases and the field of polling has its institutional biases. The goal of polling should not be to find out what’s most popular. It should be to find out how to make our values and worldview popular.