



THE VIEW

Issue #10

May 17, 2010

POLITICAL POLLSTERS HEADED BACK TO CENTER STAGE

BY
MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

The recent interlude in election-related politics is nearing an end. It is transition time in the world of politics. And it has much to do with political polling.

As the stories about the latest political polls make their way back to the front page of our newspapers and into the headlines on the various news broadcasts surely elections are not far behind. The reality is that nowadays political polling never really stops surveying on the issues. It is in the election season when we get to put faces with these issues. Speculation is already filtering into conversations among policy wonks as to what effects the November 2010 mid-term elections for Congress will have on proposed legislation between now and then. Issues like immigration, environmental legislation, regulation of the financial industry and the confirmation of a new Supreme Court Justice will all be addressed or avoided based on how a large number of Senators and Congressmen perceive the mood of the voting public.

Tuesday, May 18 marked the first of many significant political Tuesdays to come between now and November 2012. The din of political debate is already noticeably louder. The Tea Party crowd is blasting away at anyone who has ever spent more than an hour in Washington. Republicans are already reveling in anticipation of a certain gain in seats in both the House and Senate. The Democrats are digging in in hopes of minimizing losses until they can get their star player, President Obama, back on the field for the 2012 elections. Partisans on all sides are speaking with great confidence, with much of that certitude fed by their gleaning of results they like from “the polls.”

Indeed, any sort of political junkie worth her/his salt is consulting with great frequency the growing body of political survey data and “cherry picking” their talking points from those with which they agree. Of course it is often the case that those polls that do not support

one's firmly held beliefs are discarded as biased or inaccurate. Perhaps a little refresher course on political polls is in order.

The value of political polls rests in the ability of the polling organization to reflect the actual opinions of the nation or a specific district as closely as possible. Advances through the years in statistical methodology have enabled polling companies to quite accurately reflect those opinions while only interviewing a small sample of the public. To be sure, a number of myths and unfounded beliefs have sprung up to describe polls. Chief among them is the accusation that a polling group could not possibly be accurate by calling less than a thousand people out of a population of nearly 300 million people. Polling is expensive and the organizations who conduct them have a reputation to protect. Accuracy is at a premium and there is little future in missing the mark on polling results. Purposefully slanting data would be fatal to such a company.

Polling companies are continuously refining their statistical methodology. I have noticed more and more firms explaining the mix of land lines and cell phones in their samples. Why does the type of phone matter? Older, more traditional voters continue to use land lines while many younger voters and minorities have gone totally to cell phones as a means of telephone communications.

For the politically curious public there are a number of polls at the fingertips. One example is the Web site RealClearPolitics.com, which daily contains the newest summaries from several of the more well known polls. Familiar names like Gallup, Rasmussen, Associated Press, Roper, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, Pew Research, Fox News and many more are included there. One of the more recently conducted polls (May 6 through May 10) was the New York Times/Wall Street Journal Survey. This poll contained some interesting results. For example, the job approval rating for President Obama came in at an even 50% who approved of the job the president is doing. This is up slightly over previous weeks and is in line with the same category of numerous other polls. However, when responders were asked about their personal feelings for Barack Obama 69% liked him personally even if a number of those disagreed with his stance on various policies. When asked in this same poll their opinion of the job that Congress is doing, responders gave only a 21% approval rating as 72% disapproved of the job being done by Congress. When asked to rate their feelings toward the Democratic and Republican parties respectively, responders rated the Democrats positively 37% to 30% for the Republicans. Incidentally, the Tea Party movement scored a 31% positive rating in this same category. When asked their preference for a Republican-controlled Congress to a Democrat-controlled Congress respondents left things in a 44% to 44% tie.

Those who thought that a Republican runaway would be evident in the polls are probably somewhat miffed. That notion may be premature. Republican campaigner extraordinaire Karl Rove is back in town with a new improved turnout machine and President Obama has to sit out the 2010 election as far as the ballot is concerned. The country is as polarized as it has ever been. I would suggest that those who cannot stand to wait until election night should keep up with the polls. They make for good political arguments and they certainly let you know that there are a lot of folks out there who think differently that you do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's email is marty@sig.msstate.edu.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi State
UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.