

CHAPTER 40

POLLS

*The polls giveth information
The polls taketh away information,
Blessed (cursed) be the polls.*

The polls can give information?

They certainly can, but there are many ifs.

They can mislead?

Sure — it happens all the time.

Where do we start?

The most important thing to say about polls is:

- Ignore the headlines and the lead TV comment.
- Go to the question asked.
- Examine the wording of the question.
- Only then decide if it has information useful to you.

How does one evaluate a poll then?

Let's look at this. Since there is literally a new poll out every week, we use the following only as examples to demonstrate how you should evaluate them. A book

like this obviously cannot keep you up-to-date on polling results.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR

The Words Used

If the wording speaks of “woman’s rights,” or her “choice”, the majority will answer pro-abortion. If the poll asks about rights of the unborn, a strong majority will answer pro-life.

When “doctor,” or “and her physician,” or “medical reasons,” or “medical decision” is used, pro-abortion answers are almost guaranteed. The same for “health.” But if “abortionist” is used, or if for “social or economic” reasons is used, then a large majority will answer pro-life. “Terminate her pregnancy” brings a strong pro-abortion answer.

Conclusion: Read the question carefully. Is the deck stacked going in?

Give examples of “stacked” questions.

A classic example of leading the respondent by loading the question was a poll done for the National Abortion Rights Action League.

“The decision on whether or not to perform an abortion rests with the consenting patient and should be performed by a licensed physician in conformance with good medical practice.”

Results? Not surprisingly, more than 90% agreed.

Market Opinion Research, 1981,
Bailey and Deardourff

Note the woman’s right to decide, that she is a “patient” of a “licensed physician” who uses “good medical practice.” Who wouldn’t feel impelled to agree?

The same question, with different wording, can bring very different results.

- Here is an example of two questions asked of the same people in the same poll:

In general, do you think a woman should have the right to choose to have an abortion?

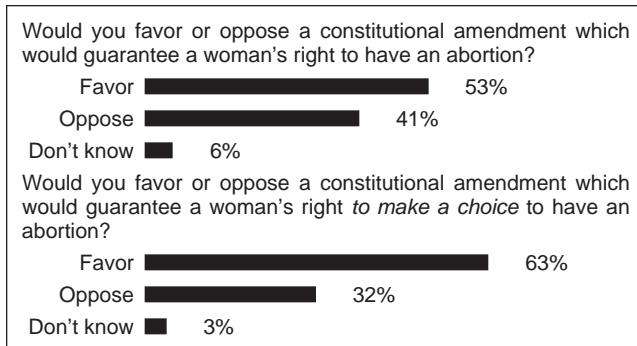
Yes - 67% No - 29%

In general, do you think the lives of unborn babies should be protected?

Yes - 69% No - 19%

National Werthin poll, Oct. '89

- Now read this one, also asked of the same people in the same poll.



Note that merely adding “to make a choice” to the wording added 10% to the approval.

Boston Globe Poll, Dec. 17, 1989

Who is asked the question?

You will get a different answer from the readership of *Ms.* magazine than from the readership of *St. Anthony Messenger*. That is obvious. What is less obvious is that truly professional polling must ask a valid cross section to be accurate.

What does the person asked know about the issue?

Some questions have asked if the person agrees with the U.S. Supreme Court Decision on abortion, when, in fact, only a tiny fraction have a reasonably accurate grasp of what it decreed. The same is true of a constitutional amendment. What do the respondents know about such an amendment? Which amendment?

Is the question factually accurate?

A frequently used question states: "The Supreme Court has legalized abortion in the first three months of pregnancy. Do you agree?" As our readers know, that statement is flatly false, yet it has been used for years.

In the next questions, the factual error about abortion only in the first three months disqualifies the results, but note also that even subtle differences in wordings bring different results.

1. "The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that a woman may go to a doctor to end a pregnancy at any time during the first three months of pregnancy. Do you favor or oppose this ruling?"

Results: Favor - 47%; Oppose - 44%

Gallup poll conducted March 1974
The Gallup Opinion Index, Report 106, April 1974

2. "The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that a woman may go to a doctor for an abortion at any time during the first three months of pregnancy. Do you favor or oppose this ruling?"

Results: Favor - 43%; Oppose - 54%

Sindlinger, "Special Hitchhiker on Abortion," for
National Review, May 1974

The change from "to end a pregnancy" to "for an abortion" changed the results. How much more of a

change would there be if “abortionist” were used instead of “doctor”; if the true nine months were stated instead of the incorrect “three months”; or if “to kill her developing baby” were used?

In tracking polls before the 1984 referendum in Colorado on abortion funding, a change from “public funding” to “your tax dollars” added 9% more to those who opposed such funding.

Does the poll contain the Life-of-the-Mother exception?

A *New York Times-CBS* poll asked the same question, with and without the exception, and found a 15% change in results.

“There is a proposal for a Constitutional Amendment that would make all abortions illegal.”

Results: Favor - 28%; Oppose - 63%;
Don’t know/no answer - 9%

“There is another proposal for a Constitutional Amendment that would allow an abortion only in order to save the life of the mother. All other abortions would be illegal.”

Results: Favor - 43%; Oppose - 48%;
Don’t know/no answer - 9%

New York Times, Oct. 14, 1984, p. E3

Is the question multi-issue?

Does the question mix abortion and contraception? The respondent may well favor one and oppose the other. Is the question placed in context with other loaded questions? Or does it stand by itself so that it can be answered on its own merits?

Is the question too general?

“Do you feel that abortion should be: (a) legal under

all circumstances, (b) only under certain circumstances, or (c) illegal under all circumstances?"

Gallup Poll/National, asked annually since 1975

If read carefully and with thought, the only people in "C" would be those who would not even allow abortion to prevent the mother's death, and the only ones in "A" would be those who even approve sex-selection abortions in the third trimester of pregnancy.

A broad, general answer is often rendered invalid (as the next two questions show), when specific details are probed.

1. "As you may have heard, in the last few years a number of states have liberalized their abortion laws. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement regarding abortion: The decision to have an abortion should be made solely by a woman and her physician?"

Results: Agree - 64%; Disagree - 31%

Commissioned by Planned Parenthood and asked in a Gallup poll. *The Gallup Opinion Index*, Report 87, Sept.

2. "Do you think it should be lawful for a woman to be able to get an abortion without her husband's consent?"

Results: Yes - 24%; No - 67%

Commissioned by Blake and asked in a Gallup poll two months after Question 1 above. (1973)

Note also the slanting of the first question: "made solely by a woman and her physician." This guarantees a pro-abortion answer.

Isn't there some legitimate way to find out public opinion on abortion?

Yes, there is. The question should simply ask for what reasons should abortion be permitted (or legal)? Several major pro-abortion news media did just this at about the same time and the results were almost identical.

**Combined Opinion Polls
ABORTION APPROVAL**

Life/Health of Mother	90%
Rape/Incest	75%
Fetal Handicap	65%
Can't Afford	40%
Too Many Children	40%
Emotional Strain	35%
To Finish School	28%
Not Married	25%
As Birth Control	16%
Sex Selection	2%

Note that the reasons approved of by a majority constitute only 1-2% of all abortions done, while those disapproved constituted over 98% of all abortions done.

Boston Globe, Mar. 31, '89; N.Y. Times, Jan 22, '89
Los Angeles Times, Mar. 19, '89 and Newsweek Apr. 24, '89.

These are all older polls. Are they still valid, or has public opinion changed?

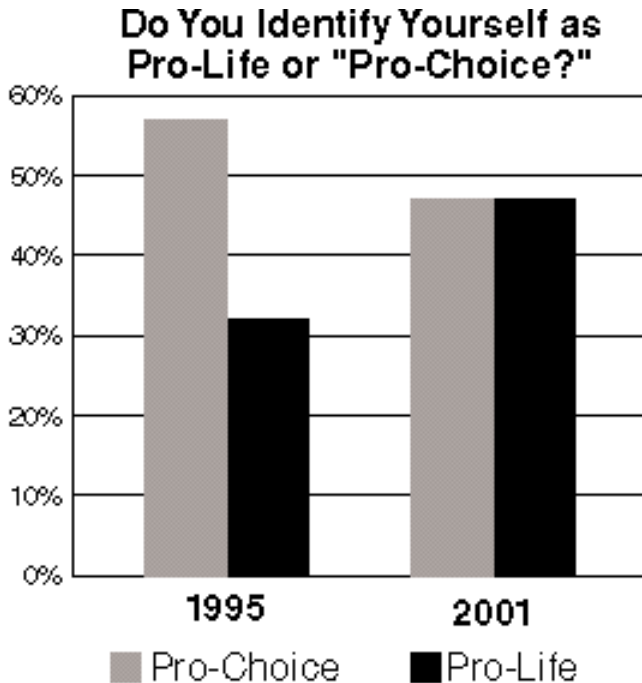
Until about the mid '90s there had been relatively little change as listed in the combined polls above.

Then came the nationwide publicity on partial-birth abortion, which taught the public that abortion is legal for 9 months. Then came the scandal of selling baby parts.

Then, in 2001 there was a prolonged debate on the first week of life. Is this human life? Does taking embryonic stem cells kill a living human? What about cloning? All of this has further educated people as to when human life begins.

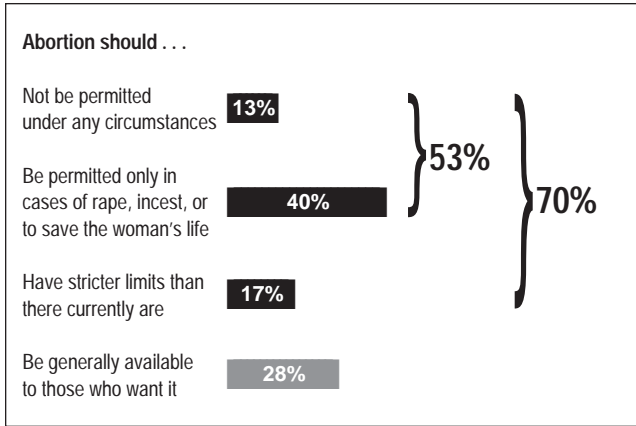
Probably because of the above, there has been a definite swing in public opinion toward pro-life.

This is summed up by the Polling Company in 2001.



Gallup in 1995 found 56% pro-choice and 33% pro-life. In 2001 it was 46% to 46%.

The strongly pro-abortion Center for Gender Equity was shocked when its own poll in January, 1999 revealed:



In May 2000, a Wirthlin Worldwide Poll broke it down to more specifics:

