

AAPOR Statements on "Push" Polls

The Problem of So-Called "Push Polls": When Advocacy Calls are Made Under the Guise of Research

This statement from AAPOR explains how to tell the difference between fraudulent political polls—commonly referred to as “push polls”—and legitimate polling, including message testing. AAPOR condemns political telemarketing under the guise of research and is committed to providing information that explains what this unethical campaign practice is and what you can do about it.

A “Push Poll” is Not a Legitimate Poll

A so-called "push poll" is an insidious form of negative campaigning, disguised as a political poll. “Push polls” are not surveys at all, but rather unethical political telemarketing -- telephone calls disguised as research that aim to persuade large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions. This misuse of the survey method exploits the trust people have in research organizations and violates the AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.

Identifying Advocacy Calls Made Under the Guise of Research

Political telemarketing calls, when disguised as research, may sometimes be difficult to differentiate from a legitimate survey. Here are characteristics that will usually indicate to a respondent that the call is not a legitimate survey.

- One or only a few questions are asked, all about a single candidate or a single issue.
- The questions are uniformly strongly negative (or sometimes uniformly positive) descriptions of the candidate or issue.
- The organization conducting the calls is not named, or a phony name is used.
- Evasive answers are given in response to requests for more information about the survey.

In addition, the following characteristics will indicate to journalists, reporters, and survey professionals that a telephone call is not a legitimate survey.

- The number of people called is very large, sometimes many thousands.
- The calls are not based on a random sample.
- It is difficult to find out which organization conducted the interviews.

Fraudulent Polls vs. Message Testing

The fact that a poll contains negative information about one or more candidates does NOT in and of itself make it a 'push poll.' Political campaigns routinely sponsor legitimate “message-testing” surveys that are used by campaign consultants to test out the effectiveness of various possible campaign

messages or campaign ad content, often including negative messages. Political message-testing surveys may sometimes be confused with fake polling, but they are very different. One way to tell is that message-testing surveys exhibit the characteristics of a legitimate survey, such as:

- At the beginning of the call, the interviewer clearly identifies the call center actually making the calls. (However, legitimate political polling firms will often choose not to identify the client who is sponsoring the research, be it a candidate or a political party, since that could bias the survey results.)
- The interview contains more than a few questions.
- The questions usually ask about more than one candidate or mention both sides of an issue.
- Questions, usually near the end of the interview, ask respondents to report demographic characteristics such as age, education level, and party identification.
- The survey is based on a random sample of voters.
- The number of respondents falls within the range of legitimate surveys, typically between 400 and 1500 interviews.

AAPOR stresses that these criteria apply most of the time, but exceptions will arise. Journalists and members of the public are encouraged to investigate allegations of “push polling” to ascertain whether or not the calling activity was carried out for legitimate research purposes.

The Threats of Fraudulent Political Calls (Political Telemarketing Under the Guise of Research)

Political advocacy calls made under the guise of a survey abuse the public’s trust. They gain the attention of respondents under false pretenses by taking advantage of the good will people have toward legitimate research.

When disguised as research, these calls create negative images of legitimate surveys, especially when they distort issues or candidate characteristics in order to influence opinion.

They go beyond the ethical boundaries of political polling by bombarding voters with distorted or even false statements in an effort to manufacture negative attitudes.

The hostility created in this way affects legitimate surveys by reducing the public’s willingness to cooperate with future survey requests.

AAPOR Position on So-Called “Push Polls”

- AAPOR Councils have repeatedly warned members and the public about the harm done by unethical political telemarketing that is conducted under the guise of research.
- The [AAPOR Code](#) identifies fraudulent political polling as unethical conduct. The Code states: “We will not misrepresent our research or conduct other activities (such as sales, fundraising, or political campaigning) under the guise of conducting research” [section I.A.2].
- AAPOR has reacted to complaints about suspected “push polls” and conducted investigations.

- AAPOR urges its members and the media to uncover instances of political telemarketing under the guise of research and help us alert the public promptly when these fraudulent political polls occur.

Issues in Message Testing

Despite their legitimacy of purpose, message-testing surveys occasionally generate vigorous complaint. They are sometimes the subject of public controversy in political campaigns, and may appear in press stories about dubious campaign practices. AAPOR recognizes that message tests may need to communicate positive or negative information in strongly political terms, in a tone similar to campaign advertisements. Still, these surveys should be judged by the same ethical standards as any other poll of the public: Do they include any false or misleading statements? Do they treat the respondent with fairness and respect?

Issues with Automated Calling

Automated telephone calling technologies, including pre-recorded political messages, automated touch-tone polls, and interactive voice response technology, also offer possibilities for abuse through fraudulent “push polling.” The issues are the same whether a live telephone caller or an automated system makes the call. Advocacy or canvassing calls should never be misrepresented to voters as research calls, whatever the mechanism of communication.

How Can You Help Combat Fraudulent Political Polling -- So-Called "Push" Polls?

AAPOR urges its members and the media to uncover unethical political telemarketing and help alert the public.

If you suspect you have received a political telemarketing call disguised as a survey, try to get as much information as possible from the caller, particularly the name and location of the organization doing the “interviewing.” Take notes on the specific questions that you were asked.

Also ask what organization is conducting the calls, the number of people called, the questions that will be included, and how the information from the call will be used.

If you are a reporter who receives information on a purported “push poll”, seek to discern if the call in question was part of a legitimate message-testing survey or was indeed political telemarketing under the guise of research. Solicit the opinions of experts who can evaluate it accordingly.

For more information contact: Standards@AAPOR.org.

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