



Why Research & Politics Make Such Interesting Bed Fellows

Chances are, you've seen the results of a few political polls as the incessant noise of this historic Presidential campaign reaches its crescendo. Chances are just as likely, that when the dust clears, more than a few media types will take direct aim at some pollsters and by association, our full profession, for purportedly having miss-called the election outcomes.


Research and politics have always been intrinsically linked. During my odyssey in this wonderful profession, I've had the pleasure to learn first hand from pollsters as well as market researchers who gauge everything from broad and issue specific public opinion, to moment-by-moment constituent reaction to political speeches. On a personal level, politics have played a role in my own career decisions and development. As an undergraduate, my first "hands on exposure" to the profession was in studying applied voting behavior and public opinion. I distinctly recall writing a paper that examined the correlation between U.S. military conflict and presidential approval ratings. Here, research reared its head as both a barometer from which one kept score and helped "spin" a situation, and as a practical tool from which decisions could be made.

"Politics" has also played a role in guiding my interests in research. As a marketer, I've always valued the intrinsic "truth" that research brings to a discipline that is so often predicated by hyperbole. I've never been one to take the assertions of someone trying to influence a business decision at face value, without an analytical justification. How many times have we all been called upon to utilize research findings to either justify, or hopefully to re-direct

a decision that is being made for strictly political reasons?

But beyond that application, good research keeps things grounded. I enjoy going into "Middle America" to conduct qualitative work, because it yields a more accurate and pragmatic understanding of consumer attitudes and priorities, that can easily be overlooked or not considered when one works in a "glamour" industry, typically mired by the narrow blinders of a bi-coastal (aka New York and Los Angeles) orientation. Research allows one to escape the "politics" of one-upsmanship so prevalent in marketing communications today.

Going back to my initial assertion, there will be many in the press who, as they did in 2004, and during this year's primary season, claim that research "got it wrong" in calling the election results. My guess is that in most of these cases this will be a false conclusion, drawn from a failure to recognize the reality of allowable error and the inherent limitations of some research to be a definitive score keeper.

I encourage all MRA members to join us at the Fall Conference in Las Vegas this November, to watch the returns (don't forget to vote by absentee ballot), and join the expert voices in making legitimate sense of how accurate the polls were. You certainly won't find a more qualified group to engage in the conversation. And you'll hopefully be able to see past the "politics" of the media coverage to engage in conversation with those who may know better. 

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