



PUBLIC OPINION  
STRATEGIES

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES  
FROM: NEIL NEWHOUSE  
SUBJECT: THE WASHINGTON POST/ABC NEWS POLL  
DATE: FEBRUARY 6, 2012

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The Washington Post/ABC News just released their most recent national poll regarding the mood of the country and the state of the Presidential campaign. Their headline is “Obama holds edge over Romney in general election matchup, poll finds,” and the writers make the point that the ballot match-up between President Obama and Governor Romney is the first time Obama has ever received more than 50% of the vote among registered voters.

***Well, there’s a good reason why. The poll introduced specific negative information about Governor Romney immediately prior to asking the ballot match-up against President Obama.***

The specifics:

The ballot test matching Obama and Romney was asked on question 32 of the questionnaire.

Question 28: In his work as a corporate investor, do you think Mitt Romney did more to (create jobs) or more to (cut jobs)?

Question 29: Do you think of Romney’s wealth as more of a (positive because it suggests he has achieved the American dream) or as more of a (negative because it suggests he benefited from opportunities that are not available to most people)?

Question 30: Romney paid about a 14% federal tax rate on income of about 22 million dollars last year. Do you think he is or is not paying his fair share of taxes?

Question 31: For each item I name, please tell me if it is a major reason to (support) that candidate, a major reason to (oppose) that candidate, or not a major factor?

- a. Romney’s business experience
- b. Romney’s Mormon religion
- c. Gingrich’s performance as Speaker of the House in the early 1990’s.
- d. Gingrich’s consulting work for companies with an interest in federal policymaking.
- e. Obama’s handling of the economy.
- f. Obama’s handling of the threat of terrorism.

***So, immediately prior to the President ballot test, this poll introduced information regarding Romney’s background and suggested “he cut jobs,” “he benefited from opportunities that are not available to other people,” “he is not paying his fair share of taxes,” and that his Mormon religion might be a factor not to support him.***

While I certainly understand the difficulty of designing a questionnaire to learn as much information as possible about a campaign, and the compromises that sometimes have to be made, the questionnaire design used by the Post/ABC Poll in this case is seriously flawed.

Their Presidential ballot test is pretty clearly tainted by the questions asked immediately prior to the ballot, resulting in what some would call a “pushed” ballot. A pollster can’t ask or suggest specific negatives on a candidate immediately prior to a ballot test and expect to get anything other than a biased result.

The ABC/Washington Post poll is rightly highly regarded for its careful design and the quality of its information. Survey design is complicated, but this is one of those times when a mistake was made and should not be repeated in the future.