

use this to attack credibility *regardless* of whether they believe the polls results to be accurate. The appearance of impropriety can be just as damning as any actual impropriety. Is it worth the risk? I think not.

At the other extreme the private act of voting is also an easy line to draw. The curtain of the ballot booth masks how I personally feel about the candidates and my evaluations of their abilities.

Contributing money to political groups and causes I would like to support is a tougher call. Unlike in partisan elections, it is hard to know in advance what issues might be on the agenda and whether any might present a real or apparent conflict of interest. But I try to avoid this situation by not giving to political groups in New Jersey.

A maxim: In politics act honorably, but refuse to believe that others will do so.

*Cliff Zukin is director of the Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University*

### ***Life Is Not Fair***

*By Sheldon R. Gawiser*

Maybe it is just part of why parents don't spend a lot of time encouraging their children to grow up to be pollsters: it's a tough life. It is easy for almost anyone to criticize a poll and easier to criticize a pollster. For public pollsters, life is even more difficult.

Because those of us who work in the media have to be viewed as objective, we give up some of the rights and privileges that others have. One of those is the ability to support candidates for office, political parties, and interest groups. I often feel the constraints of the working journalist as I am unable to participate fully in political discourse. In fact, Caesar's wife had it easier.

Most media organizations place restrictions on their journalists' activities outside of work. These often include a prohibition of any actions which might "appear" to imply a conflict of interest. This includes working for candidates, making campaign contributions, and advocating positions on issues. Journalists give up some rights because of their occupation; so do pollsters. Public pollsters must adhere to the same standards. After all, we help the journalist by providing an unbiased measure of public opinion.

We all know that the best media, public polls, and pollsters are attacked from both sides of each issue; when all sides are dissatisfied, the pollster is probably doing a pretty good job of objective measurement. Some of us get concerned whenever one side or another really likes our poll results.

I do not mean to imply in any way that pollsters must be automatons, without passion or ideals. Rather, we have to "check our opinions at the door." It is difficult enough to design and administer unbiased questionnaires, to provide good quality field work, and to produce the insightful, unbiased analysis that public polling requires. When even the appearance of a conflict of interest occurs, that job becomes much more difficult. And it may be even harder if you have put your money and support behind one candidate.

So take heart and realize that life is not fair. And may none of your children grow up to be pollsters.

*Sheldon R. Gawiser is president of Gawiser and Associates, Inc. and the National Council on Public Polls*

### ***The Appearance of Bias Undermines Confidence***

*By Jim Norman*

I'm a little leery of the basic concept of setting standards for a polling firm. Any standards *USA Today* might set would mostly be about appearances—and appearances don't always have much to do with reality. I've worked with people whose political views were a secret to the general public, but who were more interested in writing questions that vindicated their political beliefs than in getting the true picture of public opinion. And, conversely, I've had co-workers whose politics were out there for anyone to see but who had the intellectual curiosity and integrity to explore all sides of an issue.

So the question is, "Should there be any standards?" And, as much as it galls me to admit it, standards—that is to say appearances—matter... a lot. In fact, in journalism one doesn't have to get to the reading (or viewing) public before they start to matter. Some reporters and editors form opinions about the polling companies their paper or network uses based on appearances rather than the actual work done. Reporters, especially, can be susceptible to the ear-whisperings of a spinmeister that a pollster's findings are biased, and "Did you know that ..."

If this can happen within the newsroom, where journalists have access to the actual polling work and can decide for themselves, it's easy to see how the appearance of bias can harm confidence among the general public. And once a company gets a reputation as being pro-Democratic or pro-Republican, the label is hard to shake.

The standards for *USA Today* are few and basic:

— Don't contract with political candidates or parties for polling, analysis, or consulting;

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## **The Polling Business**

— Key people at the company should not campaign in any form for a candidate or party; and,

— Key people should not contribute money to a candidate or party.

That's it. It would be nice if the key people in a firm were all registered as independents. It would be splendid if they didn't even vote. But it seems improper to require individuals to take such steps. In sum, keep the standards—the appearances—to a minimum, and put maximum effort into the reality of making the polls as unbiased as possible.

*Jim Norman is polling director, USA Today*

## **Don't Ask, Don't Tell**

*By Warren J. Mitofsky*

When the head of an American satellite company made major campaign contributions to the Democratic Party, 40% of Americans thought this action influenced the Clinton administration's decision to let US companies continue working with China on satellite launches (CBS News/*New York Times* poll, June 10, 1998). Maybe it did influence the decision and maybe it did not. At this time, we do not know. What we do know is that the administration's credibility is in question.

Similarly, a pollster who works for a candidate or a party is publicly recognized as a spinmeister for a cause. Peter Hart and Bob Teeter, who used to compete in the presidential political arena, have teamed up to produce public polls for NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*. Have they completely shed their past partisanship? Do they counterbalance each other's political views? Or do they trade loaded questions favoring one party or the other? Regardless, the credibility of their polls will be an issue to some.

Where do we draw the line between openly public partisanship and more private political behavior? Will our polls lose credibility if we register to vote in one party's primaries or if we give money to a candidate? Will our polls be credible if we vote for candidates of one party more often than the other? Surely most pollsters have political opinions that guide their private behavior, even if they manage to keep it out of public view. "Don't ask, don't tell" seems to be the only basis for dealing with the partisanship we all harbor to one degree or another.

Several things seem clear. First, the credibility of a poll is important. Second, public partisan activity by pollsters will diminish or impair the credibility of their polls. Third, there is no logical place to draw a line; we must judge pollsters' work, not their former or implicit partisanship.

*Warren Mitofsky is president of  
Mitofsky International*

## **Working Both Sides of the Street**

*By Robert M. Worcester*

The position of political opinion pollsters in the US has been like a hand grenade with the pin pulled, waiting to go off. I've long marvelled at my friends in the business of conducting private polls in America for one political party or another trying to explain on TV how their polls were somehow different than those of the public pollsters. I knew—we all knew—that the tools of our trade don't allow that.

I've been grateful that the convention here in Britain is that we work both for the news media and for the parties and do not take a partisan approach. From time to time I have worked simultaneously for the Labour Party (directly, for 17 years), the *Daily Express*, which is the national newspaper arguably farthest to the right, for the Tories, and for the *Daily Mirror*, which supported Labour.

During my nearly 30 years of polling in Britain, MORI has worked for all three major parties, several fringe parties, nearly every newspaper group, and for both major television networks at one time or another while, for over two decades, doing the polls of record for the *London Times*. However, I have always taken the position since beginning to work both sides of the street—private polling for parties and public polling for the media—that I would not vote, would not make contributions, and would not participate in any activity that would show partisanship in any way. Support for interest groups is, however, another matter and there my conscience is my guide.

Perhaps the toughest call was some years ago when I was approached to do a poll for publication by the Palestine Liberation Organization. My initial reaction was to say no. My colleagues asked me to sleep on it. In the morning I laid down four conditions: 1) We state we are working for the PLO, not any front group; 2) We write the questions; 3) Everything is published; and, 4) We are paid up front. The PLO agreed. We did the poll, and it ran on the main nightly news on both channels; both made the point that MORI stood behind the findings. Of course, it helps enormously that the terms and conditions with our clients provide that we hold the copyright, clear the copy and graphics, and that the data are released in full upon publication, and if not published in the event of an editorial decision not to publish, are released by MORI seven days after the date of intended publication.

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