

August 24, 2007

## “They’re Back”

Put this in the "Back to the Future" column.

Some folks in Iowa were “push polled” on Sunday evening 8/19/2007. Or were they? Utah area code on caller ID? A short and ostensibly innocuous Republican leaning survey until the "if you knew" questions started popping up. First the questions were about Mitt Romney, then about Fred Thompson, then about Mitt Romney, then about Fred Thompson. Was this an attempt at inoculation by either one of these two guys? Probably not, it's too ingenious - also very risky. Is Rudy Giuliani behind this, or some other Republican candidate? It's anybody's guess. Are the Democrats involved? It's happened before. I would venture to say that it's unclear as to who is responsible, but we will be able to find that out after we see the next FEC reports. In the previous 2000 presidential election cycle, did not a Republican candidate's campaign (read president) hire some telemarketing firm located in Utah to do some of this stuff in South Carolina?

Hard-core push polls are designed specifically to smear or spread negative rumors about someone or someone's campaign. Nothing more, nothing less. Push polls are relatively cheap compared to legitimate surveys. Computer generated Robo-Calling is becoming more popular and has further reduced the cost of push-polling. The calls will number in the thousands, are very short and always contain some outlandish or potentially slanderous comments about a specific political candidate or campaign under the guise of serious survey questioning.

Why is push polling done?

Because it works, that's why! What better way to inject unfounded rumors into the political discussion and defame your opponents than under the cloak of conducting a legitimate scientific survey? Increased opposition negatives are always something to be desired in a competitive campaign. But at what cost and how, are the questions we have to ask ourselves.

Here are some well known and documented examples of push polling.

How about stirring the political pot with ingredients like these:

- 1 An illegitimate child
- 2 Race and
- 3 A southern Republican primary.

That would surely get the local pols yakking. And it did. Back in 2000 during the Republican presidential primary in South Carolina, likely Republican primary voters were asked the following question in a “push poll”.

"Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?"

No pollster would ask such a loaded question in a legitimate survey. The intent of those push pollsters, more specifically the folks who financed the push polling operation, was to do nothing more than to inject into the political discussion the untrue and ridiculous claim about McCain. Did that statement resonate in the state of South Carolina among likely Republican primary voters? McCain came in second in the primary to Bush with 42% compared to Bush's 53%. This, after soundly thrashing Bush earlier in the New Hampshire primary, 49% to 30%. Alan Keyes was third with 5%. (The truth was that McCain has an adopted Bangladeshi daughter and she was campaigning with him in South Carolina during the 2000 presidential primaries.)

Like a little religion in your push polling?

Take a look at these examples. Both involve current presidential candidates, one a perpetrator and the other a victim.

A candidate for US Senate attempted to tap into a suspected latent anti-jewish sentiment in a midwestern state by reminding his potential constituents that his Democratic opponent was a Jew. Why was that done? You might want to ask that of current Republican presidential contender, Kansas Senator Sam Brownback.. His 1996 senate campaign was the author of that push poll. He won the election over the Democrat Jill "Sadowsky" Dockett with 54% of the vote.

"John McCain's campaign manager is a New York Jew". This useless bit of information was disseminated to the voters in a New Hampshire push poll prior to their First in Nation Primary" in 2000, courtesy of the Bush campaign. In this case the effectiveness of the tactic is in doubt, as McCain defeated Bush 49% to 30%. Forbes was third with 13% followed by Alan Keyes, 6% and Gary Bauer with 1%.

Sometimes legitimate pollsters engage in practices that come very close to those of push pollsters. How do you, as a potential poll respondent, tell the good guys from the bad? Here are a couple questions that you may want to ask a pollster the next time you are called and asked to participate in a survey.

The first question to ask is always, "what polling firm, research house, political campaign, or other group is conducting this poll?"

Next,

"who's paying for this poll?" Follow the money!

If the caller refuses to answer these questions or their answers just don't ring true, hang up.

Whether it's the candidates religion, race, husband, wife or former wives that are the subjects of these push polls, you can rest assured that if you live in Iowa, are a registered voter and plan on attending your precinct caucus, you'll hear about them. And you can look for this unsavory but successful practice to continue for many months to come. Not only in Iowa but in other states as well. Iowa just has the dubious honor of being first in line.

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