

Democracy North Carolina

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Data Highlight:

Misleading Polls from the Pope Civitas Institute

The John W. Pope Civitas Institute is publicizing a new opinion poll designed to bring attention to their perspective on key issues, in this case election-related policies [*see notes 1 and 2 below*]. It's a formula that works well for them, with some media reporting the poll's findings as an accurate reflection of what North Carolinians believe.

But surveys can be manipulated to get a desired outcome in a number of ways - for example, by cherry picking the respondents or by using loaded wording in a question. The recent Pope Civitas Institute poll appears to suffer from both problems.

The poll taken January 19-20 yielded two press releases, and in each release Pope Civitas claims that "All respondents were part of a fully representative sample of registered voters in North Carolina." But the crosstabs [*see note 3*] reveal that some subgroups of registered voters are under-represented in the survey, while others are over-represented.

For example:

- African Americans make up 21.6% of registered voters in North Carolina (as of January 1, 2011), but they are only 16.0% of the Pope Civitas survey respondents.
- Republicans are 31.6% of registered voters but 34.0% of the respondents.
- Seniors age 66 and up are 17.5% of registered voters, but 23.3% of those included in the poll's findings.
- In contrast, young people age 18 to 25 are 11.4% of registered voters, but only 7.3% of the respondents.

In other words, the survey substantially under-represents black voters and over-represents elderly voters. Republicans are also over-represented and the Democrats selected are much older and whiter (and likely more conservative) than the actual profile of registered Democrats in North Carolina.

It is simply misleading to present the poll as "fully representative sample of registered voters in North Carolina." The press release also says the survey focused its interviews on an odd mixture of people who either voted in two of the past four general elections or who registered since 2008. But it still claims to be a representative sample of all registered voters.

The questions asked in the poll also seem calculated to distort an honest survey of public opinion.

>> A question about North Carolina's new law that allows teenagers to pre-register to vote but not vote at an earlier age is stated as: "Would you support or oppose a proposal to allow 16 and 17 year olds to register to vote?" There's nothing indicating that the teenager is not allowed to vote at an earlier age, or that the law was designed to help them pre-register when they visit the DMV at age 16 and take Civics in the 10th grade. The legislation had broad bipartisan support in the General Assembly and became effective January 1, 2010.

Perhaps the heavy opposition expressed by those surveyed would have changed if the question's wording read: "Would you support or oppose a proposal to keep the voting age in North Carolina at 18 but allow 16 and 17 year olds to pre-register to vote when they sign up for a driver's license?"

Ironically, the new law does not appear to particularly hurt Republicans. An analysis by Democracy North Carolina of the 38,500 teenagers who pre-registered during 2010 shows that 30.6% signed up as Republicans, 29.2% as Democrats, 0.9% as Libertarian and 39.3% as Unaffiliated.

>> A second Pope Civitas question, this one about the Same Day Registration law, is asked this way: "Would you support or oppose a proposal allowing unregistered people to register and vote on the same day?"

The results would likely be different if the wording said: "Would you support or oppose a proposal allowing citizens to register and vote on the same day, if they were required to present a North Carolina driver's license or other ID that could be verified before their ballot counted?"

>> A third question asks: "Would you support or oppose a proposal using taxpayer dollars to fund politician's campaigns?" The Pope Civitas Institute uses the 83% negative response to say the public financing program for appellate judicial candidates should be gutted, but taxpayers are not compelled to fund the politicians' campaigns.

A little over half of the money for the NC Public Campaign Fund comes from a \$3 check-off on the state income tax form that is completely voluntary for the taxpayer. The other half comes from an assessment on the dues paid by attorneys to the State Bar, and the attorney can designate that the money only go to support the judicial voter guide mailed to households, which represents about a third of the program's total cost.

So contrary to the deceptive framing of the Pope Civitas so-called opinion poll, no one is compelled to support judicial candidates with a dime of tax money.

To illustrate how the wording in a question can influence the answer, contrast the Pope Civitas findings with the April 2009 poll by the NC Center for Voter Education [note 4]. The Center's pollster asked the question this way: "North Carolina currently has a law that gives statewide judicial candidates the option of accepting public campaign funding if they agree to spending limits and refuse money from political

action committees. It also makes judicial elections nonpartisan and provides voter guides to explain judicial candidates' qualifications. What is your position on this program?"

In response, 60% of the voters surveyed said they favored the program, while 22% opposed it and 18% were undecided.

One wonders how much longer the Pope Civitas Institute can gain attention for a form of "push polling" that asks carefully selected audiences carefully crafted questions to produce a response it wants to publicize.

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Note 1: Press release - <http://www.nccivitas.org/2011/civitas-poll-nc-voters-dislike-current-elections-laws/>

Note 2: Press release - <http://www.nccivitas.org/2011/civitas-poll-voter-opposition-to-taxpayer-financed-campaigns-increases/>

Note 3: Crosstabs: <http://www.nccivitas.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Election-Laws-February-11-PR-CTs.pdf>

Note 4: NC Center poll:
http://ncvoterred.com/research/2009/5_5_09_expand_cos_financing.php