

Mitchell's Musings 9-15-14: Poles Apart

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

In past musings, we have commented on the uncertainty raised by opinion polls on important public issues. Complex issues that many people have never heard of or considered are presented by pollsters to respondents who provide “answers” that are highly dependent on the framing of the questions. Recent polls regarding two initiatives that are on the November 2014 California ballot illustrate this issue. If you doubted my point before, read on!

Proposition 45 would provide for rate regulation of health insurance by the state’s elected insurance commissioner, who currently can opine on such rates, but cannot cap them. Not surprisingly, the insurance commissioner supports Prop 45 since it expands his authority. The opposition comes from two sources. Again, not surprisingly, the insurance carriers in the state oppose the proposition. But also opposed are the operators of the state’s “Obamacare” health exchange. There seems to be a turf war going on between the health exchange administrators and the insurance commissioner that is behind the controversy.

Proposition 46 ostensibly is about drug testing of doctors (who wants a drugged out doctor?), but is actually an effort by trial lawyers to raise the state’s cap on malpractice awards.¹ So, not surprisingly, doctors are opposed and lawyers are in favor. In both the cases of Prop 45 and 46, vast sums will be expended on TV, radio, and other advertising as Election Day approaches.² And you can already assume that the sponsors of these propositions spent \$1-\$2 million just to hire commercial signature gatherers to put these initiatives on the ballot.

Naturally, there is much at stake for the proponents and opponents of these ballot propositions. And, of course, anything related to health care is topical these days because of the changes the health system is undergoing at the national level. Those in the policy wonk world and those representing the major interest groups involved are obviously aware of the initiatives and have been aware since the petitions to put them on the ballot began to circulate. But it is reasonable to assume that the general public had little knowledge of the propositions and are only now – as advertising has begun and news media articles are appearing – forming opinions.

¹The actual texts of the two initiatives can be found at <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2014/general/pdf/complete-vig.pdf#page=67>. (Prop 45 is on this page. Just continue to the next page for Prop 46.) See also the official voter guides: <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2014/general/en/pdf/proposition-45-title-summary-analysis.pdf>, <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2014/general/en/pdf/proposition-45-arguments-rebuttals.pdf>, <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2014/general/en/pdf/proposition-46-title-summary-analysis.pdf>, and <http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2014/general/en/pdf/proposition-46-arguments-rebuttals.pdf>.

²A sample radio ad that has begun to air is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWoVU_xhtOY.

One of the major sources of public opinion polling information in California is the Field Poll which for many years has been a source of political information on attitudes toward public issues. Like all pollsters, however, to be relevant and interesting, Field has to track opinions on what voters might be feeling about ballot issues and candidates. But that need poses a dilemma, since Field must produce opinions about issues on which many in the public simply don't have formed opinions. So in one way or another, it must tell those being surveyed what the issues are all about. What it says is and how it says it is going to be important in determining the answers received.

Trend of voter preferences on two statewide health-related ballot measures: Propositions 45 and 46 (among likely voters)			
	Yes	No	Undecided
Proposition 45 (Health Insurance Rate Changes)			
Late August/Early September	41%	26	33
Late June/Early July	69%	16	15
Proposition 46 (Drug Testing of Doctors/ Medical Negligence Lawsuits)			
Late August/Early September	34%	37	29
Late June/Early July	58%	30	12

Note: Late August/early September poll conducted using a summary of each proposition's official ballot label. The official ballot label for these initiatives had not yet been released by the California Secretary of State at the time of the late June/early July survey.

As the table above from the Field poll shows, there was a dramatic swing in reported voter attitudes towards Prop 45 and 46 between late June/early July and late August/early September.³ In the earlier survey, the two were reported as favored by 69% and 58%, respectfully. A couple of months later, the percentages had dropped to 41% and 34%. Note that in the earlier survey, 15% and 12% said they were undecided. A couple months later, a lot of folks who were decided early on apparently changed their minds concerning what they were decided about. And the really heavy advertising regarding the two propositions had not begun in that interval.

Let's put aside the merits and demerits of the two ballot propositions. It should be obvious that when dealing with issues in which there will be controversy as the election approaches, early polling is not very helpful as a forecast unless you can present the questions as voters will eventually hear them. QED

³Source: <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/Rls2485.pdf>.