

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

SCENE

THE WEEK OF OCTOBER 25 - 31, 2018



LIFESTYLES

THEATER REVIEW:
'WOLF AT THE DOOR'

Page 16

PEOPLE

HABCORE'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY GALA: HOUSING THE HOMELESS WITH STABILITY, DIGNITY, HOPE

Page 22

Patrick Murray

A Pollster For Our Time

At this time of year it's not unusual to receive a call from a polling organization seeking input from registered voters on the upcoming elections. Not a few of us are likely to hang up, annoyed at one more intrusion into our personal lives.

But Patrick Murray, founding director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, would like us to reconsider.

After all, it's the voices of many different Americans that have the power to direct the course of government and influence public policy for many years to come.

"One of our missions is to basically give voice to people who don't always have a voice and to feed that back to political leaders," Murray said.

A university-based polling organization seeks to conduct its polling in a nonpartisan way that will provide a reliable measure of public opinion.

"We want to include as little information (on the polling topic) as possible when contacting a respondent so people can interpret the question as they wish. We don't try to give the impression that there is a right or wrong answer."

It's important to have a good understanding of what issues are resonating in the public mind before developing questions that will clarify respondent concerns and provide a reliable gauge of public opinion, Murray said.

"That is one of the most underappreciated skills. It's the reason why I spend time talking to people before writing a poll. For example, it helps to know what people are talking about at the local diner as the daily news cycle unfolds.

"One of the big things we're getting this year that has gotten underreported is this undercurrent of health care insecurity," Murray noted. "People are saying, 'We're OK now,' but they're worried that they're one crisis away from insolvency."

When it comes to political issues, a well-conducted poll may not deliver the results a particular party or candidate wants to hear.

After one political poll, Murray said, "I was commenting on the state of a senate race here in New Jersey and I got a call that day from the campaign managers of the Republican campaign and I also got a call from the director of the Democratic campaign, both complaining about what I said. That was a day when I did my job well."

One thing Murray has learned firsthand is that what appear to be ideological inconsistencies to pundits and academics are fully rational to individual voters. "The media in particular get caught up in the idea that politics play out

along the liberal and conservative continuum. That's not how the vast majority of voters think."

Murray was studying political science at Rutgers University in the early '90s when he stopped in at the Rutgers-sponsored Eagleton polling institute to see if there was anything a graduate student could do for them.

It proved to be a turning point for Murray, who ultimately spent 10 years there and helped start the survey research center at Rutgers' Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.

He left there in 2005, when he became the founding director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute. "I came here to help get this off the ground," he said.

Jules Plangere, former publisher of The Asbury Park Press and a major benefactor of Monmouth University, provided the initial endowment for the institute.

"He was really the force

behind the institute," Murray said. Under his direction, the institute soon built a reputation as a reliable polling organization.

administer the surveys they develop. "Keeping a call center afloat is expensive," Murray said.

It is a charter member of

"One of our missions is to basically give voice to the people who don't always have a voice and to feed that back to political leaders."

-Patrick Murray

Ten years after its founding, in 2015, Monmouth University Polling Institute fully committed to becoming a national polling organization.

The institute now has a staff of four with a support staff of four graduate students and three or four undergrads. The institute contracts with off-campus call centers to

the American Association for Public Opinion Research and has been awarded an A-plus rating from Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight, which conducts statistical analysis of political poll results nationwide.

Many topics the polling institute explores may not garner major public attention, but nevertheless provide vital

information that may influence public policy.

For example, Murray said, the Centers for Disease Control may solicit research on childhood vaccination rates in particular areas that will influence planning and policy decisions.

Following Super Storm Sandy, Murray said, his institute deployed a cadre of Monmouth University students who went door to door in damaged areas to obtain firsthand data on the progress of the recovery. With the information they collected, the institute built a 2,000-name email list of people directly impacted by Sandy.

Most polling is conducted by phone – both mobile and landline – using publicly available data such as voter registration records. "Voter registration gives basic information such as age, gender, how often people vote, what precinct they're likely to vote in, to create a sample that looks like what the pool of vot-

ers will be," Murray said.

Polling organizations also obtain lists of voters in particular categories, such as those who hold gun permits or those who donate to a particular candidate or political party, to solicit opinions from specific groups.

Polls are an imprecise research tool and there is always a level of uncertainty involved, Murray noted.

"We have more wins than losses. We have a good 'on base' percentage. The expectation that any single pollsters is going to be accurate 95 percent of the time is unrealistic. There are going to be misses, but misses are learning opportunities.

We want to use (polling) as a tool to advocate on behalf of the public, not for any particular position but to advocate that their voice is at the table when decisions are made. We can only do that if people are willing to talk to us."

BY EILEEN MOON

