

# Polling Job Performance and Favorability: Three Approaches

## CLEAR DISTINCTIONS, SAFE ASSUMPTIONS

BY CHRIS WILSON

ONE OF THE MOST over-repeated phrases we pollsters hear is, “there are three types of liars: liars, damn liars and statisticians.” While I obviously believe that to be an unfair characterization, it is easy to understand why many Americans are skeptical of survey research and often disregard the results. There are clear distinctions between the way different pollsters measure public opinion. For instance, media pollsters (Gallup, Harris, Yankelovich) use very different methods and approaches than do most political pollsters. There are several theories for why this is – and I certainly have my own – but that is a subject for a different article.

An area with widespread variation, especially between media and political pollsters, is the ability to accurately ascertain 1) job performance or job approval and 2) favorability ratings. A key element is simply understanding the difference between those above terms, what they mean to voters in general, and then comprehending the techniques available to accurately measure each of them.

While performance and approval are relatively similar, favorability must be measured differently to establish true strengths and weaknesses, not just overall – but in the levels of intensity as well – which is even more important than the aggregate rating.

First, the best way to measure job performance is to forgo terms such as approve/disapprove or positive/negative for a more descriptive scale ranging from excellent to poor. One of my own pet peeves is using the word “fair” to determine job performance. Webster defines fair as “sufficient but not ample.” I’m sure most everyone else has his or her own personal definition and it is a safe assumption that each one is different.

It is reasonable to surmise that there is a range in which people view the word “fair” – from status quo to Webster to simply sub-par. You have to look at any survey result using such nebulous terms very critically. Therefore, the job performance scale in my surveys uses “not so good” rather than “fair” or “only fair” as the third of the four categories (the others being “excellent,” “good” and “poor”). This alternative wording, using “not so good,” does have the effect of elevating overall job performance ratings somewhat.

However, extensive research has shown that the typical wording severely underestimates the level of satisfaction with an incumbent’s performance, as a substantial proportion of those who say an incumbent’s performance is “fair” remain willing to support his or her re-election.

For instance, in a recent congressional survey – just to illustrate this distinction for a client – the incumbents’ job performance was asked both ways (excellent, good, fair, poor vs. excellent, good, not so good, poor). The incumbent was receiving more than one in three votes (35 percent) from those who rated him “fair” or “poor” while he was receiving fewer than one in

five votes (19 percent) from those who rated him “not so good” or “poor” – a significant and important difference.

Next, in looking at a candidate’s or individual’s favorability rating, there is little variance in the way most pollsters ask the initial question. The differences come from the way intensity is determined. The three main terms used are “strongly,” “highly” and “very” on the high end and “mostly” vs. “somewhat” on the low end.

I have found the descriptive terms “strongly” and “highly” tend to underestimate intensity of favorability. Similarly “mostly” tends to overestimate the deficiency in intensity of favorability. Again, the difference is in the gradations, not the aggregate. But for correlation to vote performance and other important factors, the level of intensity is far more important than the overall percentage of favorability.

For instance, in asking favorability on a recent survey, I used a split sample with the term “strongly” for one-half of respondents and “very” for the other half. For the same individual (being tested) the intensity ratings were a full 10 points higher among those choosing “strongly” (48 percent) than they were with those choosing “very” (38 percent). Furthermore, the candidate was 15 points more likely to be the vote choice of those who were “very” (85 percent) favorable than he was with those who were “strongly” (70 percent) favorable. Once more, an important and significant distinction.

Finally, I have found that “mostly” tends to underrate that same intensity proportion and, again, miscalculate the individual’s dependable strength in relation to voter support. Therefore, I use the term “somewhat” as a counterbalance to “very” to ascertain a candidate’s overall favorability rating.

Pollsters – political and media analogously – are likely to have their own opinions regarding these issues. My conclusions are arrived at through the predominant and overriding goal of utilizing both job performance and favorability to determine a candidate’s strength with the electorate. If survey questions, and therefore numbers or findings, don’t give you a basis from which to form an overall campaign strategy, in my view, they are worthless. Therefore, every question – whether it deals with job ratings, favorability or any

other presumably important point – must pass one very important test: Does it help the poll consumer/client accomplish his or her overall goal? (which in my case is usually winning an election). If the answer is no, the question either needs to be reworded or it doesn’t need to be asked.