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Pollster Ken Warren on Polls, Politics, and Southern Illinois

SouthernIllinoisDemocrats.Org spoke with [Saint Louis University](#) Political Scientist and professional pollster, Ken Warren. Warren is president of [The Warren Poll](#), a St. Louis based polling company. Warren has recently published [In Defense of Public Opinion Polling \(Westview Press\)](#), an extensive analysis of the reputation of public opinion polling and its role in American elections. We spoke with him about his book and about polling and politics in Southern Illinois.

SID: In terms of voter behavior and public opinion, what obstacles confront candidates for federal or state level office in the non urban areas such as Southern Illinois?

Warren: Candidates in rural areas complain about their ability to reach down in a cost-effective way. They can't buy ads that are cost effective, because they can't buy on a single station that will reach millions of people at one time or even hundreds of thousands. Voters are hard to reach by radio and they are hard to reach by television. That forces candidates to do it by foot or by other means: that can be difficult. Public opinion in rural areas is also hard to measure, compared to urban areas, where public opinion polls can be very cost effective. This is because you can get a representative sample that will represent hundreds of thousands of voting people, say for St. Louis or St. Louis county. While in rural areas, the challenge I've had in doing public opinion polls is that it is more difficult to get a representative sample of the entire region. Interestingly enough, you can get a representative sample that can reflect an entire area, but what happens is that you obtain liberal and conservative elements that cancel each other out. Rural areas tend to have liberal and conservative enclaves. This makes campaigning and polling in rural areas very, very tough. Rural areas have the populations that are obviously spread out. It makes campaigning tougher, it makes public opinion polling tougher, because pollsters have a hard time locating concentrations of similar people ideologically target for their candidate.

SID: How do congressman and state representatives fare in their access to polling data in areas like Southern Illinois?

Warren: For polling data, what they do is to take public opinion polling from state wide surveys. The problem is that the sample within, for example the state representatives area, were actually interviewed is not very large. So the sampling error is very large. Most rural candidates don't have a lot of money and can't afford public opinion polls on their own. Public opinion polls for a candidate are going to run at a minimum of eight thousand dollars a piece. That's if they get them fairly cheap. If they use a national polling organization they are going to pay a lot more than that. The problem remains, because, what they really need is a poll in their particular area. They then may try to use the poll data of their Democrat organization or Republican organization in the state where their party has done polling state wide. They try to get their party to share their poll data. The problem is, to reiterate, that there were not too many people sampled for that particular area. Of course, the typical poll only includes about 600 people, give or take a hundred or so. That means for rural Southern Illinois the number is extremely small and the people who were represented may not be from the candidate's particular area. You have all these districts in Illinois, state and congressional, they can represent, relatively speaking, widely different populations. There are wide differences of opinion from one rural area to the next. Like Carbondale has different political leaning than other areas of southern Illinois.

SID: In rural counties, how can a candidate hope to get a picture of who the voters like and what the voters want?

Warren: The ideal, if you have money, is to take a public opinion poll of your constituents, of your particular district. This is very expensive, but if you have the money that would be the ideal. You can use the public opinion poll to find out what people like and dislike about both you and your opponent. Also, in a typical benchmark poll where you want to find the basics about the district, what public policy preferences the constitutes prefer and what they prefer in characteristics of a candidate. Public opinion polls are used to help target certain people and to maximize your potential votes by allowing you to understand your district and what people like and what they do not like in the public policy area.

SID: Public opinion is important, but what can you tell us about the role of money in campaigns and its influence

on election outcomes?

Warren: There is a high relationship between money spent in the campaign and winning. The higher the money that is spent, the more likely you are to win; that is all other things being equal. A challenger can spend a lot of money running against an incumbent, but the odds of that challenger winning would be very low, even though the person spent a lot of money. But there is no question that money plays a major role in a political campaign. You need money to achieve name recognition, particularly in an open seat race. Achieving name recognition costs a lot of money. You also have to have money for campaign organization, for public opinion polls, and for your strategist who uses public opinion polls to wage a cost effective campaign.

SID: What parts of your book would be of most interest to candidates or their campaign managers?

Warren: Definitely chapter seven on the use of public opinion polls by politicians. I go into relative detail on the kinds of public opinion polls politicians use. I talk about the pros and cons of these public opinion polls. I talk about benchmark polls and tracking polls, and how they're used in detail by campaign managers/strategists. The chapter makes very apparent that public opinion polls are essential to political campaigns. Public opinion polls are used to poll on anything to help plan most aspect of political campaigns. Politicians, after reading that chapter, would realize that public opinion polls are absolutely essential for knowing how to detect your strengths and weaknesses and the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent or opponents. Also, to know what issues are popular and not popular with the voters in that district. It also allows you to target certain groups of people who you might be weak with in order to strengthen your vote. Normally, voters are not strong in all parts of their district. Most districts are mixed enough to cause problems for a candidate in some areas. Public opinion polls show where they're strong, where they're weak. Actually cross tabulations show why they're weak or strong in those districts. For instance a candidate might take a certain stand on gun control which might be strong, lets say he's for gun control in Carbondale, but in the rural areas of that same district people might be very much against gun control. So, that person might have to work in the rural areas more to explain why they are for gun control and that sort of thing.

SID: What do you think of the redistricting challenge faced by Congressman David Phelps?

Warren: As a pollster, one of the first things you need to do is run what I call "a get to know your district poll," which is known in the trade as being a "benchmark poll." But Phelps has to find out whether or not Shimkus is beatable and where Shimkus is vulnerable. As a non-incumbent in that area where Shimkus is the incumbent, he would have a tough row to hoe. I don't think he would be able to beat the incumbent. I think the first thing Phelps would have to do is to assess the situation. A pollster would say that, therefore, the first thing he needs to do is conduct a comprehensive benchmark poll to see where he stands and how far behind he is. No doubt that he is behind, the question is, obviously, if incumbents win as high as over ninety percent of elections, in the 1998 elections incumbents won in over ninety eight percent of the U.S. representative seats, does Phelps have any realistic chance? Anyone challenging an incumbent has an uphill battle. However, there are two reasons why incumbents lose. One is scandal and the other is redistricting. I suppose that Shimkus' district has changed somewhat, so that means that Phelps will have to see where he is strong and where he is weak in the districts to see whether he has any chance of winning.

SID: Could you talk about "push polls?"

Warren: Push polls are considered non-polls. They're not legitimate polls at all. Push polls are usually put in quotation marks when pollster's discuss them. Push polls are used to try to push potential voters in the direction of one candidate and away from another candidate. Their purpose is not to actually obtain public opinion on these candidates or find out who is ahead and who is behind. The purpose is actually to contaminate your opponent by saying negative things in order to get people to come toward you but to push them away from the other candidate. For example, a push poll could be a question where a list of suggestive or accusative characterizations are given about the opponent and then followed with a question "would you vote for him?" Rather than saying simply, "would you vote for this person or that person." Push polls just contaminate the response against the candidate in the questions. Push polls are considered to be unethical to the point that the professional polling associations outright condemn them and even have hotlines to call if you learn about a push poll. An informed respondent should report the push poll that is being conducted to these organizations. In my book I have a hotline number a person call to turn in a pollster doing a push poll.*

SID: What do pollsters do when they are not working for a candidate or campaign organization?

Warren: Around ninety-five percent of all polling is non-political polling. Most pollsters are delighted when they don't have to poll for a political candidate. Practically everything about polling for non-political clients is better, as I note in my book. Usually there is this incredible urgency when conducting polls for political candidates. The pay is not particularly good and sometimes you get stiffed. Once you realize that most political candidates loose and that most political candidates spend way over their budget, it simply makes sense that, someone is likely to be stiffed by the candidate or campaign. Different people, who have worked for them such as paid staff, catering services, printers and pollsters, too often end up not getting paid in full. The media, for example, want you to pay up front, and now telephone companies, when they put in lines, want to be paid up front because they know candidates have a reputation for not paying off. So, "what do pollsters do when they are not working for political candidates?" Personally, I poll for private clients such as regular organizations and particularly municipalities. Pollsters keep pretty busy doing market research. There is a lot of money in doing market research and a lot of money in doing polls for government, governmental clients.

*To report a push poll or questionable polling practices contact the American Association of Public Opinion Research at <http://www.aapor.org/ethics/pushpoll.html>.

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