



Push Polling



The question, in the midst of a telephone poll, was as shocking as it was designed to be: Would you still favor Rudy Silbaugh, a Republican candidate for the Wisconsin state assembly, if you knew he voted to give guns back to juveniles who had used them in crimes?

Mr. Silbaugh and other Wisconsin Republicans filed a lawsuit because of that damaging assertion, which the Republican Party said was made recently by a telemarketing firm calling on behalf of Democratic candidates. But they recognized the campaign tactic, having used it themselves.

It's known as "push polling," and it has increasingly become implemented at the last minute of political campaigns when the airwaves have grown saturated with political messages.

For years, campaign pollsters have conducted surveys of a few hundred voters to test the potency of negative information for later use in broad attacks, such as television advertising. What's different about push polling, though not easy to trace, is the use of phone calls as the means of disseminating attacks to thousands of voters at a time. But unlike the case with TV ads or direct-mail brochures, federal law doesn't require congressional campaigns to identify who's paying for the calls.

"If people want to lie, cheat, and steal, they should be held accountable," said Rep. Tom Petri,

Republican of Wisconsin, who complains that anonymous callers in 1992 told constituents that he was a tool of Japanese auto dealers and responsible for the savings and loan mess.

In Colorado, the campaign of Democratic governor Roy Romer, who was reelected, complained to the state attorney general that opponent Bruce Benson's campaign used push polling in violation of a Colorado statute forbidding anonymous campaigning.

The advocacy in question, according to a script obtained by the governor's aides, asked voters if they'd be more or less likely to support Mr. Romer if they knew that "there have been nearly 1,300 murders in Colorado since Romer was first elected and not one murderer has been put to death." Follow-up questions informed voters that the state parole board "has granted early release to an average of four convicted felons per day every day since Romer took office," that Mr. Romer spent "one out of every four days outside of Colorado" during his four-year term, and "is being sued for mismanaging the state's foster-care system."

The attorney general declined to prosecute, but Romer campaign manager Alan Salazar complained that the lack of accountability of push polling, as well as the enhanced credibility of an attack delivered personally to voters, makes the practice worrisome.