

## Lies, Damned Lies, and Polls

In our republic, voting is crucial for electing candidates who will represent our needs. But how do we know who to vote for? It's hard work, especially when so much of what we're fed is worthless — unless, of course, you believe everything you read.

Recently, Greater 901 started conducting polls to see what Memphians value in elected leaders and to track the upcoming Mayoral race. Run by nonpartisan locals, our goal is simple — to inform voters about Mayoral candidates' stances on important issues so that you can vote your heart out.

### What's the big deal?

A fair poll informs candidates of public preferences, helping them to shape their platform. It also can reveal which candidate the public leans towards. This is valuable for voters and candidates alike. So, whenever you get the chance, take a poll. Set aside 10 minutes, answer the questions, and let your voice be heard.

### Tricky, tricky polls.

When you're reading the results of a poll, how do you know whether the data is valid? We won't bore you with the details, but rather give you the highlights of what to watch out for.

A good, valid poll has a solid [margin of error](#). This is the measure of uncertainty in poll results, showing how close a repeated poll would be to the first one. If a poll says 10% of the population will vote for Mayor John Doe, with a margin of error of +/- 4%, that means around 6% to 14% may vote for John Doe. If the margin of error is above 5%, don't read it — even 5.2% is garbage.

You also want to look at the **level of confidence**, which shows the reliability of poll results. A 95% level of confidence means that the results would be the same in 95 out of 100 similar polls. If a poll's level of confidence is under 95%, you should toss it. In Greater 901's most recent poll, all results were validated by a similar poll conducted by the Daily Memphian. When polls are consistent, you know they're reliable.

Both the level of confidence and the margin of error rely on the **population sample**. The poll should include likely voters and reflect area demographics. One way pollers can manipulate results is by sampling people who agree with them, not the general population. A **straw poll** does just that, by creating a narrative that one candidate is doing better than others.

For example, if a group polls only their email subscribers, the results do not represent the general population — they represent that specific group's opinions. With a straw poll, campaigners will say things like, *we have 30% of the vote*. When, in reality, they have 30% of the room.

With tactics like this, pollsters stack the deck to create the bandwagon effect, where people radiate towards the likely winner — *if all these people like Mr. Smith, they must be okay!* Watch for tricky tactics, and always look at the margin of error, the level of confidence, and the population sample to determine the poll's validity. If any of these measures aren't published, you can throw the poll in the trash.

### **Fool me once, shame on you.**

A valid poll should use simple and concise language. Conversely, shady polls use language to manipulate you. A shining example is a **push poll**, which uses guiding questions to push a certain agenda. In truth, a push poll is a [sleazy manipulation tactic](#) disguised as a poll.

To avoid this, take a closer look at the questions used:

- *Do you support the irresponsible and wasteful spending proposed by John Doe?*  
Leading or loaded questions are framed in a biased manner, intending to manipulate you.
- *If you found out that John Doe filed false tax reports, would you vote for him?*  
Negative or inflammatory statements intend to spread negative or false information, rather than gathering your unbiased feedback.
- *Do you think John Doe is honest and trustworthy, and will they bring positive change?*  
Double-barreled questions ask two or more things at once, making it difficult for you to provide a clear answer.

Pay attention to questions like these when filling out a poll. If you notice any of these tactics being used, chuck it.

### **It's time to push back.**

Whether you're taking a poll or viewing its results, making sure the poll is valid is key for you to develop an informed opinion and make an impact with your vote. So, before you dig into poll results, think back to these tips. And remember, don't believe everything you're told — unless you research it yourself, then you're welcome to form your own opinion.

Stay tuned for other insights and our next poll as [Greater 901](#) keeps track of the upcoming Memphis Mayoral election.