

Obtaining meaningful poll results requires asking meaningful questions. It seems obvious, but too often this basic rule is observed in the breach. Typically, after some useless result escapes into the ether, reporters and interest groups proceed to spin some new theory of public opinion based on faulty analysis of a meaningless question.

Last week's Gallup poll on abortion followed this oft-repeated pattern. Gallup confined itself to reporting the accurate, if misleading, result—"51 percent of Americans call[ing] themselves 'pro-life' on the issue of abortion and 42 percent 'pro-choice.' This is the first time a majority of U.S. adults have identified themselves as pro-life since Gallup began asking this question in 1995."

A *Wall Street Journal* blog twisted the result to suggest a substantive interpretation not in evidence—"A majority of Americans now say they oppose abortion rights, according to a Gallup poll released today." Leave it to those who want to make all abortions illegal to move way beyond the facts, citing the poll results as proof the anti-abortion cause "is a vibrant, growing, youthful movement."

What did these Gallup results actually reveal about American public opinion? Damn little.

First, as Professor Charles Franklin points out, the sample for this particular Gallup poll was much more Republican than most others Gallup has done, leading more respondents to identify themselves as "pro-life."

More problematic is the language itself. While the political class readily identifies with words like "pro-choice" and "pro-life," many voters do not. In a large national survey we conducted, fewer than half of respondents defined the term "pro-choice" in a way even remotely connected to the abortion debate. Only 28 percent made explicit reference to abortion in their response. Another 20 percent offered a vague definition, usually about trusting women.

Half, however, were not even close. "Having the choice to change your mind if you want to—about anything." "The choice to live, the choice to die." "Choosing your religion for me." Thus, questions asking voters to embrace one of these labels are not necessarily even tapping into the abortion debate, because so few know what the terms mean.

In addition, accepting one of those labels does not necessarily relate to real public policy choices in any meaningful way. For instance, in our survey, nearly a third of those who called themselves "pro-life" reject the view that "the government should pass more laws restricting the availability of abortions," saying instead "the government should not interfere with a woman's access to abortion." Would anti-choice leaders hold up as one of their own a politician who opposed laws restricting abortion?

That is exactly where the American people are—by 62 percent to 27, voters oppose additional legal restrictions on the availability of abortion.

*Roe v. Wade* is at the heart of the public policy debate. A week after Gallup's poll, CNN and Opinion Research Corp. defined the decision this way: "The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision established a woman's constitutional right to an abortion at least in the first three months of pregnancy." Sixty-eight percent wanted to keep *Roe* in place—hardly the position of those celebrating Gallup's result. Just 30 percent supported overturning *Roe*.

In short, the data tell us Americans oppose government restrictions on abortion and want to keep *Roe* in place, while identifying themselves as pro-life—a term many do not understand.

Useful poll questions on public policy meet at least two key criteria. They use words and concepts respondents understand and they employ categories that reflect the real terms of the debate. Asking people whether they are “pro-choice” or “pro-life” meets neither of those criteria and therefore does more to obscure the debate than to illuminate it.