

A Tale of Two Gun-Control Polls

Written by Rich Miller
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It appears that the Illinois State Rifle Association released some highly questionable poll results last week because top officials learned that a gun-control group was doing its own polling. The Rifle Association decided it wanted to get ahead of the curve, I'm told.

The Rifle Association claimed its poll results showed broad support in a handful of legislative districts for the right to carry a concealed weapon in Illinois, even in two African-American Chicago Senate districts. But there are serious problems about the way the questions were asked, including the fact that the phrase "concealed carry" was never even mentioned in the poll, despite a Rifle Association press release claiming it was. Concealed carry is one of the hottest issues of the spring legislative session.

The poll asked three very leading, loaded questions before getting to the carry issue. Respondents were asked if they felt safe walking around their neighborhood, if they believed local police can protect them from being "robbed or assaulted," and whether they believed they have a "right to defend yourself and your family from murderers, robbers, and rapists."

Questions such as that will obviously set a certain tone and then skew answers to the poll's last question, which was millions of miles from being neutral: "Would you support a law that would allow trained, law-abiding citizens like yourself to carry a firearm to protect yourself and your family from harm?" The word "concealed" is not mentioned – odd, considering that this is a fight over "concealed" carry. Yet, the Rifle Association claimed in a press release that the answers to the question showed support for concealed carry. Also, how did the Rifle Association know that the poll's respondents were law-abiders?

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All that being said, 48 percent of the 989 respondents in Senator Mattie Hunter's Chicago district said they'd support such a law, while just 35 percent were against. Fifty-two percent supported it in Senator Emil Jones' Chicago district, while 33 percent were against. Fifty-six percent backed the plan in Senator A.J. Wilhelmi's Joliet-area district, and just 28 percent were against. And 49 percent in Senator Mike Noland's Elgin-area district said they'd support such a law, while 35 percent were against. The poll was taken by We Ask America on March 27.

The day after the Rifle Association released its numbers, the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence released its own poll that was taken by the same polling firm used by Illinois State Rifle Association. The new poll showed far different results.

In the gun-control group's poll, taken five days before the Rifle Association's, just 38 percent of respondents in state Senator A.J. Wilhelmi's Joliet-area district said they agreed with this statement: "In general, Illinois citizens should be allowed to carry concealed handguns in most public places." A clear majority (57 percent) was opposed. The concealed-carry question was the first posed to respondents, unlike in the Rifle Association poll, which laid the groundwork for its carry question.

The Rifle Association claimed its poll showed that a clear majority of voters in Senator Wilhelmi's district backed concealed carry. The difference? The gun-control poll was far more direct and used accepted polling standards. The Rifle Association poll didn't do any of that.

Back to the gun-control group's poll. A slim majority, 51 percent, of voters in Senator Wilhelmi's district agreed with this statement: "Handguns should be registered in a similar manner as automobiles." Just 33 percent disagreed.

And a whopping 69 percent concurred with this statement: "I think someone who wants to own a handgun should have to pass a skills test before being licensed to own one." Just 21 percent disagreed. None of these answers appears to jibe at all with the claims by the Rifle Association that strong support exists in Wilhelmi's district for loosening gun-control laws.

The gun-control group also surveyed one African-American House district.

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More than 70 percent of voters polled in Representative André Thapedi's district said people should not be allowed to carry concealed handguns in most public places. Just 23 percent said they should. A bit over 61 percent said handguns should be registered in a similar manner as automobiles, while 26 percent disagreed. And close to 77 percent said handgun owners should be made to pass a skills test before acquiring an owner's license.

In Republican state Representative's Sid Mathias' northwest suburban House district, 69 percent opposed allowing concealed carry in most public places, 54 percent wanted similar registrations for handguns and automobiles, and 77 percent said they thought handgun owners should pass a skills test.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.