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Students work in the Marist Institute for Public Opinion at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. (Marist College/Carlo de Jesus)

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It's impossible to open up a newspaper or turn on the TV this close to the Nov. 5 election without seeing a story about political polls. But where do polls come from?

Who is calling you?

The National Catholic Reporter talked to two polling directors: Don Levy at Siena College's [Siena College Research Institute](#), and Lee Miringoff at Marist College's [Marist Institute for Public Opinion](#). They're both small liberal arts colleges in New York, and both have a faith connection: Siena College is still run by the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscans), and Marist College was founded by the Marist Brothers, although they no longer operate it.

This election cycle has created an increased interest in polling. "We live in a remarkably tumultuous and critical period of time," said Levy. "We ask if people think this is the most important election of their life, and 70-75% say yes."

Is this election really that different from others? For pollsters, maybe. It started out without much happening in the polling world. There were voters who didn't like Donald Trump but who didn't like President Joe Biden either. After Biden's decision to drop out, however, huge numbers of previously undecided voters, [often younger and more highly educated](#), shifted to Vice President Kamala Harris.

Did the announcement of vice presidential picks make a difference? "VP choices get a lot of attention, and they don't matter until they do," said Miringoff. He noted that JD Vance has added to the already wide gender gap between men and women, [reflecting recent trends](#) of men being more inclined to vote for conservative candidates.

Miringoff [founded](#) the Institute for Public Opinion [in 1978](#). "There were very few independent polls who the median public could rely on," he said, just polls run by campaigns.

But polls are important, not just for a snapshot of sentiment but also for a broader scope of political education. "We not only measure the moment within the race, but understand how every kind of American is making their decision. Many Americans don't know that much about who believes what," said Levy.

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Today, there's the opposite problem from 1978: a huge proliferation of polls. Both Miringoff and Levy have advice for how someone can tell if a poll is reliable or not.

"Transparency is a big deal," said Miringoff. "A polling website should have a means of finding out more, and they should talk about what they did to get that polling data." He added that some polls are actually partisan but are unclear about their affiliation, and urged people to be cautious when seeing a poll from a new source.

"Look at polling aggregation sites, look at everyone, look at different methodologies," said Levy.

One thing, though, is that polls are not a crystal ball, can be overscrutinized, and people have been making bigger demands of what polls can do. "If there's an expectation that a poll in July is going to predict an election in November, that's an overly aggressive expectation," said Levy.

Miringoff said that small increases in percentage points don't necessarily mean anything. "It may be a real change, or it may not be a real change," he said. "It's an estimate by definition."

It can be hard to collect the data. Siena is still a telephone polling center: They don't do texts or other newer methods. This has been challenging in an era when far fewer people have landlines, and people are much more reluctant to answer their cellphone when an unknown number calls. But Levy thinks phone calls are still the best method.

"Polling has changed, and the way that we do it is more expensive. People have looked for modes of polling that keep costs down," he said.

Siena works off the list of registered voters, either nationally or in key states, and they compute a probability that someone will vote based on history, electoral composition and the person's response. They have had to change the way they poll and how they structure their questionnaires. Levy also noted that, since 2020, it's been more difficult to get Trump supporters to respond.

Both Siena and Marist also conduct polls on topics besides just elections. Siena notably polled people on their opinions on the building of a mosque near the 9/11 site. Marist Poll also acts as a consulting poll agency for nonprofits and other firms.

'We try to see where possible we can use polling to ameliorate human suffering and make the world a better place.'

—Don Levy, Siena College Research Institute

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Miringoff emphasized that at Marist, polling is first and foremost an educational program for the students. In addition to being the director of the institute, he's also a professor who teaches courses on voter behavior. He thinks being able to give students hands-on experience with polling is valuable. "We're part of the curriculum," he said.

Levy said Siena, which also has student pollsters, has an ability to be flexible that larger institutions don't have — and that this explains their greater success.

They both think that having polling centers has been good for their college's name recognition and ability to attract students, which is important when many small liberal arts colleges have been closing. For some students at Siena and Marist, it's a way to participate in an election in a unique way.

Two of the latest entrants to the polling scene are also at Catholic institutions: the [Marquette Law School Poll](#), founded in 2012 at Marquette University in Wisconsin, and [St. Anselm Poll, founded in 2016](#) at St. Anselm College in New Hampshire.

Are these polling centers influenced by their historical religious mission? Levy thinks so, especially when it comes to their issue polls.

"We spend a fair amount of energy on interviewing people on things like community well-being, health and optimism. We try to see where possible we can use polling to ameliorate human suffering and make the world a better place." This approach, he says, reflects the school's Franciscan values.

Marist College has had a lay board of trustees [since 1969](#), and stopped being recognized as a Catholic institution [in 2003](#). But Miringoff sees the Marist Brothers' legacy reflected, even if slightly, in the polling center.

"They're a community-focused order, and we're a community and citizen information project," he said.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)