

## **Are outside corporations and individuals interfering with our local election?**

By Benicia Vice Mayor Steve Young, September 23, 2018

While relaxing at home last evening, I received a call from a Saratoga phone number. The caller said she was conducting a poll for Research America on the upcoming election for Governor, Senator and City Council. Having more than a passing interest in the topic, I agreed to be questioned on my opinions. However, there were no questions about the Governor or Senate race-it was strictly limited to the Benicia City Council race.

It soon became clear that this was a classic "push poll". According to the American Association of Public Opinion Research, a group of legitimate polling operations, "AAPOR defines a "push poll" as a form of negative campaigning that is disguised as a political poll. "Push polls" are actually political telemarketing -- telephone calls disguised as research that aim to persuade large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions."

While there were no questions in the poll about William Eames, and limited questions about Christina Strawbridge, there were lots of questions about Lionel Largaespada and Kari Birdseye. All of the questions were in the format of "Let me read you some statements about the candidate, and tell me if they make you more or less likely to support them in the election"

The statements about Mr. Largaespada were uniformly positive and stated how, for example, he would use his small business background to improve the City's economy and relations with its businesses.

The statements about Ms. Birdseye were the opposite. Among these statements were "She wants to shut down Valero, costing hundreds of jobs." and "She will bring radical left-wing politics to City Hall".

If someone heard those statements, and believed them to be true, that would clearly influence their vote-which is the real purpose of a push poll. The descriptions of Ms. Birdseye's positions are clearly NOT true. But that is of little concern to those paying for the operation, if they are successful in painting a false portrait of her in the minds of voters.

There was also a lengthy section on endorsements, asking if endorsements from the following people and organizations made me more or less likely to vote for a candidate. Among those listed were yours truly, the Mayor, the Central Labor Council (and their affiliates the Benicia Teachers, Police and Fire unions), Valero, the Chamber of Commerce, the Progressive Democrats of Benicia, Congressman Thompson, and the Solano County Democratic Central Committee.

Finally, there was a question about the proposed Industrial Safety Ordinance that offered two choices that boiled down to either the argument advanced by the proponents of such an ordinance or the one made by the opponents, including Valero.

When the questioning was completed, I asked the person on the other end a series of questions, and she was surprisingly talkative. First, who paid for the poll? She answered, convincingly, that she did not know, since knowing it might bias the questions. (Of course, the questions were ridiculously biased as written). Second, who signed her paycheck? Research America. Third, where was she located? In the Poconos in Eastern Pennsylvania. When I responded that the call was shown coming from a California phone number, she said that was done all the time to convince more people to answer the phone.

Fourth, was she calling from home? No, she was in an office building. Finally, how many people were making these calls on the Benicia council race? On any given day, she said, 40-80 people were making these calls.

The last answer shocked me. If true, and I have no reason to doubt any of her answers, this means that literally every Benicia voter could eventually receive these phony polling calls.

Fortunately, I believe most Benicia voters are smart enough to see these calls for what they are-an extremely expensive effort to try and smear one candidate with false charges and to benefit another. Who would spend this kind of money to influence the Council race is the great unknown question. But there is clearly some outside person or corporation willing to spend a lot of money to try and influence this election.