Soda tax or fat tax?
Questions can influence poll results, Cornell expert says

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ALBANY -- In polling as in soda marketing, the words you choose make a difference.

When two pollsters recently asked New Yorkers whether they support the proposed state soda tax, the responses were very different -- and so was the wording of the queries.

From the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute: "There is a proposal for an 'obesity tax' or a 'fat tax' on non-diet sugary soft drinks. Do you support or oppose such a measure?"

From Kiley & Company: "Please tell me whether you feel the state should take that step in order to help balance the budget, should seriously consider it, should consider it only as a last resort, or should definitely not consider taking that step: 'Imposing a new 18 percent tax on sodas and other soft drinks containing sugar, which would also reduce childhood obesity.' "

Yasamin Miller, director of the Survey Research Institute at Cornell University, didn't need to see the results to know how people responded: She correctly predicted that more people supported the soda tax in the Kiley poll. About 58 percent of Kiley respondents said the tax should be considered, while only 40 percent supported it in the Quinnipiac poll.

"You can manipulate public opinion, depending on how you word your question, very easily," Miller said.

Neither question is perfect, she said. Quinnipiac's reference to "obesity" and "fat" play on emotions and skew the response. But the Kiley question gets into trouble by positing that the tax will help balance the budget and reduce childhood obesity.

"You've loaded it heavily," Miller said.

The Kiley poll was sponsored by the Greater New York Hospital Association, which represents an industry that stands to lose a lot of money in the state's current budget woes. New revenue sources such as the soda tax could reduce those cuts.

Matthew Shelter, a senior analyst at Kiley, said the soda tax would certainly help the budget by bringing in revenue, though he was willing to concede that its ability to reduce childhood obesity was a stretch since it has yet to be proven.

Indeed, the Kiley poll asked two versions of the question: one with that obesity clause, one without it. Shelter said the survey's designers wanted to see whether framing it as a health issue affected the outcome. Without mention of obesity, 54 percent said the tax should be considered; 59 percent who supported it with the obesity clause.

Maurice Carroll, director of Quinnipiac polling, said both questions were valid, adding that "fat tax" is accurate if informal.

"My evaluation would be that ours is a neutral question and theirs was a question that included an
argument in favor of the thing," Carroll said.

Dr. Richard Daines, the state health commission who supports the tax, liked Kiley's version best -- and said he wants the chance to prove the tax reduces obesity.

"You won't demonstrate that a tax across New York does this until you have a tax across New York," Daines said.

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Results vary

How many New Yorkers support tax on sugar-sweetened drinks?

58 percent according to a poll by Kiley and Company

40 percent according to a poll by Quinnipiac University Polling Institute