

Trust the Polls, Ignore the Pundits

By Claudia Deane and Richard Morin

When Americans told pollsters that the election was not about Monica Lewinsky, they meant it. The polls picked up this sentiment, though it was doubted even through the last weekend of frantic punditry. It was an important reminder of the weight the public places on domestic economic performance.

That bit of self-congratulation out of the way, let's revert to our contrarian pollster natures and talk about a few things we might have learned from the polls, but didn't. Specifically, we want to ruminate on that permanent problem, the chronically dissatisfying results we obtain when we rely on national polls to explain and predict the results of an unruly amalgamation of 435 local elections. More specifically, we want to think about the usefulness of two standard fixtures of mid-term election polls: the generic House vote question and the turnout screens used to fine tune it.

“ *Between question wording effects, order effects, differences in likely voter screens and the abundance of surveys, the media seemed to be erecting a Tower of Babel one poll at a time. And don't forget the name game: registered voters, likely voters, very likely voters, and certain voters all appeared in print. Perhaps next cycle, some of us will be reporting results based on 'I'll Bet My 401-K on These Voters.'* ”

The Whole Is Less Than Its Parts

The generic congressional vote question is a classic case of the whole being far less than the sum of its parts. Yes, the final polls came close enough to predicting each party's share of the vote nationwide—at least close enough for newspaper work. These polls revealed some of the big picture of the electorate's inclinations. But they failed to predict many of the most important stories written after the actual votes were counted, such as the predominance of moderate voters, the showy Democratic strength in the South, or the spikes in black turnout in certain key states.

Looking back across the trends of some of the major national polling organizations, it's not clear, even in retrospect, whether the generic question was telling these stories, or if it was telling any story at all. Polls reporting the question based on registered voters almost unanimously showed the Democrats with an edge, varying from small to comfortable. Polls reporting likely voters had the race tighter. There were internal fluctuations and fluctuations across survey organizations. Between question wording effects, order effects, differences in likely voter screens and the abundance of surveys, the media seemed to be erecting a Tower of Babel one poll at a time. And don't forget the name game: registered voters, likely voters, very likely voters, and certain voters all appeared in print. Perhaps next cycle, some of us will be reporting results based on 'I'll Bet My 401-K on These Voters.'

If the election wasn't about some overarching national issue, like the President's fitness for office, then what kind of story was there to tell about the meaning of change in the generic numbers? Therein lies part of 1998's particular problem. It was hard, despite the evidence within our own surveys, to jettison the idea that the national scandal playing so prominently in the media must be driving the generic numbers in some intelligible fashion that we weren't quite intelligent enough to decode. It was a

causal tar-baby that we couldn't lose, no matter how hard we tried.

Meanwhile, here in Washington, DC, a class of high school sophomores beat out 13 professional pundits (including four of the country's leading pollsters) in a *Washington Post* contest which asked entrants to predict the number of seats each party would hold in the next House. The students did this by carefully taking the nation apart, assigning each person one of the too-close-to-call districts, and then doing their homework on demographics, voting history, and local polls. Then they put the country back together piece by piece. In short, they ignored the shadow national elections and went to the real contests.

The Story's About Moderates

One fascinating story that emerged from the exit polls (but not from pre-election polling) was the strong showing among self-described moderates who made up 50% of voters this year. Ironically, this was the one group the media had largely ignored, having spent the fall claiming at various times (and sometimes simultaneously) that the right would be energized by Clinton's troubles, no, wait, the left would be energized; that's not it, maybe the left would be depressed, or maybe the left and the right would be energized and depressed.

At the *Washington Post*, we decided to shift resources away from national pre-election polls this year to a race in our own backyard: the Maryland governor's race. And even here, we found a challenge to our results.

The *Post's* final poll, completed 12 days before the election, showed the Democratic incumbent with a modest lead, a result contrary to conventional wisdom about the state of the race. Nineteen percent of all likely voters in

Chapter 3

the poll were black, a group voting almost unanimously for the Democrat. Given that blacks made up only 12% of the electorate in Maryland's last mid-term election, this seemed high, and was the subject of some puzzled discussion in the newsroom and among state political pollsters, who seized on this discrepancy to cast doubt on our result.

As it happened, black turnout in Maryland was 21%—higher than in the 1996 presidential election. The Democratic incumbent won handily.

The Polls vs. the Conventional Wisdom

By Brad Bannon

If I learned anything during the 1998 campaign, and I would like to think I did, it was something I should have learned a long time ago: Trust the numbers and forget about the conventional wisdom. “Conventional wisdom” has become as much an oxymoron in politics as “free agency” has in sports. With the proliferation of pontificating pundits (not to be confused with the nattering nabobs of negativism), the conventional wisdom is becoming more commonplace and conventional all the time. It also is becoming more difficult to resist even for people like me, who have been trained to go by the numbers. And in the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I have on occasion accepted and even articulated the conventional wisdom.

“ Democrats picked up seats in the House and avoided losses in the Senate by boldly calling for higher government spending to hire new school teachers and tighter government regulations to prevent HMO abuses. ”

Even though there was little public opinion data to demonstrate the point, the basic piece of conventional wisdom dominating the 1998 campaign was the Democratic party would lose seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. This conventional wisdom was based primarily on assumptions that the Democratic party would take a hit in 1998 because of the President's sex scandal and because losses were inevitable, since the president's party always loses strength in off-year elections, especially in the sixth year of a president's term.

Democrats Led the Trial Heats

The pundits had established the conventional wisdom about Democratic prospects, or the lack thereof, early on even

Though we mentioned the high number of black likely voters in our coverage of the race, we did so more as a caveat than as a story about possible turnout. The lessons from this, which we seem to relearn every election, are simple: Trust your poll. Ignore the pundits. Use the turnout screens to characterize the shape of the electorate, and not merely to estimate the horse race.

And keep the resume up-to-date (bad things sometimes happen to good pollsters.)

though there was survey data demonstrating that a Democratic demise was unlikely. National surveys by the Pew Research Center conducted in January, February, and March 1998 indicated that Democratic candidates had leads of 10, 9, and 12 points, respectively, over Republican candidates in generic congressional trial heats. Further, the public's indifference to the President's embarrassing relationship with Monica Lewinsky should have been apparent with the Democratic lead in the trial heats remaining steady in the two months following the Monicamania outbreak. Even on election eve, a Gallup poll indicated that Democrats had a four-point lead among likely voters. There should have been little surprise when the Democrats picked up House seats.

Missing from the conventional wisdom was the fact that national surveys indicated there was enough popular support for the Democrats' strong activist agenda to overcome a presidential scandal and to stop voters from scratching the six-year itch. For instance, a national survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in January 1998 showed that three out of four Americans supported Democratic proposals to increase federal spending for education, reform HMOs, and raise the minimum wage.

This brings us to the post-election conventional wisdom, which appears to have as little to do with public opinion data as the pre-election wisdom did. The conventional spin on the election outcome was that Democrats won because they had presented a moderate face to the electorate, and Republicans lost because they were so obsessed with the Clinton sex scandal they did not communicate an agenda to voters.

Democratic success was not a victory for moderation or caution. Democrats picked up seats in the House and avoided losses in the Senate by boldly calling for higher government spending to hire new schoolteachers and tighter government regulation to prevent HMO abuses. This agenda also played a key role in stimulating turnout among union members and African-Americans. The Voter News Service national exit