

Poll Call *From the Field*

By Eric W. Rademacher and Andrew E. Smith

The National Council on Public Polls (NCPP) recently released its evaluation of the ten national pre-election presidential polls using “traditional” telephone survey methods. How did they fare? The NCPP conclusion: “The accuracy of the election projections based on the pre-election polls of 2000 was surpassed only by the polls of 1976 and 1960....”

In previous years, the accuracy of state pre-election polls, and the methods used to gather data for such polls, generally have been subject to less scrutiny than the national polls. However, polls conducted by both university-based and private research organizations in individual states received greater attention in 2000 as national polls showed a close race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

The 2000 election reminded researchers, the media, and the public that there is not a single national election for president, but rather 51 state elections (including Washington, DC). And, as Election Day approached, several analysts relied on the results of state polls to gauge how close the Electoral College vote would be. How well did state polls reflect final statewide presidential outcomes?

In the weeks after Election Day, we compiled the results of 79 state level pre-election surveys. These surveys were conducted by 39 sepa-

rate organizations, including both in-state organizations which regularly conduct state polls, and out-of-state organizations. Each survey was in the field late in the campaign (on or after October 27, 2000), was conducted by telephone, and reported responses of likely voters.

While there are several available approaches to evaluating the performance of these polls, for this analysis we focused on two criteria. To begin with, for comparability purposes, we adopted NCPP’s “candidate error” method of evaluation—calculated by subtracting the margin between the top two candidates in a poll from the margin between the same candidates in the actual election, and then dividing the difference in half to get the error per candidate.

Next, we evaluated the success or failure of the polls in reflecting statewide Election Day winners both within the reported margin of sampling error and by using the real world criterion applied by the public: did the poll identify the winner?

We must mention two caveats. First, several state pre-election polls, though conducted close to Election Day, were not intended to be projections in the same sense used by some organizations conducting national election polls. Therefore, we discuss the polls in this context, evaluating what they reflected (as opposed to projected) against state election outcomes.

Second, unlike national polls, a majority of state pre-election polls did *not* allocate undecided voter preferences. This makes it more difficult to evaluate their overall performance.

The verdict on the 79 state level telephone polls is mixed. First, on average, these polls did not perform as well as the national polls in terms of the candidate-error measure. Candidate errors for national polls averaged 1.1 percentage points, compared to 1.9 for polls conducted in the states. In addition, there was variability in the performance of the state polls. Twenty-nine percent performed very well, with a candidate error of less than one percentage point, 52% had a candidate error between 1 and 3 points, and 19% had a candidate error greater than 3 points.

On a second measure of performance—whether or not the telephone poll correctly identified the Election Day winner—15% *did not* (see Figure 1). While the public may be less forgiving, it is important to note that each of these poll “errors” was within the reported margin of sampling error. And several of these “incorrect” polls did reflect tight races in states where the Election Day result was very close (e.g., Florida, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Wisconsin).

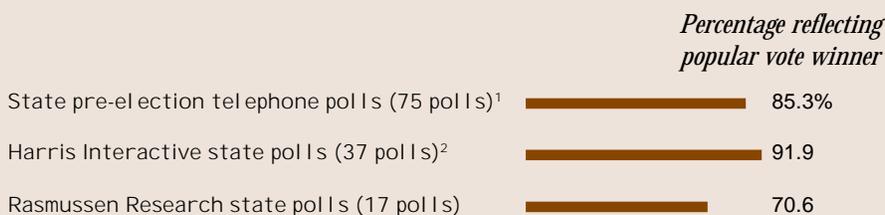
Harris Interactive and Rasmussen Research also conducted pre-election surveys in 2000. Both employed innovative, if not controversial methods.

The performance of Harris Interactive’s pre-election surveys, conducted over the internet between October 30 and November 6, has generated a great deal of discussion. The NCPP analysis noted the accuracy of the national Harris Interactive survey, and we further examined the organization’s performance in 38 statewide pre-election polls conducted via the internet.

Eric W. Rademacher is research associate, Institute for Policy Research, University of Cincinnati, and Andrew E. Smith is director of the Survey Center, University of New Hampshire.

Figure 1

Accuracy of 2000 Presidential Election Polls in the States



¹A total of 79 state polls were included in this analysis, but four of the polls reflected an exact percentage-point tie among the top two presidential candidates.

²Harris conducted 38 polls, but one poll reflected an exact percentage-point tie among the top two presidential candidates.

Harris' estimates performed as well as, and in some cases better than, those made by organizations using telephone survey methodologies. The only Harris "errors" in identifying the winners came in closely contested states (Florida, New Hampshire and Washington) and each were within the reported margin of sampling error.

The Harris results represent both welcome and exciting news to public opinion researchers looking to expand their trade on the internet. Despite the successes, though, pre-election surveyors will, no doubt, remain skeptical until they see the results of Harris Interactive's next big test—polling state-by-state in the 2002 off-year elections. Off-year election outcomes are typically more difficult to project due to the lower salience of the contests and lower voter turnout.

Rasmussen Research's state pre-election polls were less successful. Rasmussen conducted 17 polls after October 27, using an automated telephone method in which interviews are conducted by computers with recorded voices rather than by human interviewers.

Rasmussen's statewide estimates had a higher candidate error, on average, than state pre-election polls conducted by telephone or by the Harris method, and incorrectly identified the winner

in five of the 17 races polled (Iowa, Washington, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania). However, as with the other polls discussed here, some of these "errors" were in closely contested states, and all were within the polls' reported margins of sampling error.

While many organizations that conducted state pre-election polls are probably satisfied with their performance in 2000, others may be reevaluating their methods. Some polls that did not perform as well as others may have fallen victim to last minute shifts in vote preferences. Along these lines, one less than surprising lesson from this analysis is that polling closer to the election can often, but not always, result in more accurate reflections of Election Day outcomes: of the 11 polls which did not correctly identify the winner, just two were in the field after November 4.

A final point about the state polls conducted by telephone in 2000 concerns the use of results from these polls to evaluate Bush and Gore's likely Electoral College vote. Several analyses over the campaign used these results, along with other information, to classify states as strongly or weakly leaning toward one candidate or another, or as "toss-ups." While we found several state pre-election polls to be good sources of information for

formulating such classifications, others were not.

For example, on average, state polls using traditional telephone survey methods misestimated the gap separating Bush and Gore by more than 3.5 percentage points. Twenty-nine percent of the polls either overestimated or underestimated the gap separating Bush and Gore by five or more percentage points. In some states, these gap estimations provided information that might have led to classifying a presidential race as more or less competitive than it actually was (others simply exaggerated the lead in an already non-competitive race).

Because these individual "gap errors" tended to range within the margin of error that can be placed around the gap separating the two major party candidates, organizations should at least consider greater emphasis on reporting the significance of the size of the gap, in addition to reporting the margin of sampling error, when they prepare final reports of poll results.

As states are often called the "laboratories of democracy," so, too, are they laboratories for pre-election polling methodology. It is our hope that the 2000 elections will spur greater research into the methodologies organizations employ in their pre-election polls. We should strive to learn from those who get it right, as well as from those who come up short, so that we can all improve our research methods.

The authors would like to thank Dan Majesky of the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Policy Research and Dennis Junius of the University of New Hampshire's Survey Center for their help in compiling and verifying the figures presented here. The authors take sole responsibility for the accuracy of the data used in these analyses and the accuracy of the analyses.