

**THE POLLS AND THE 1989 ELECTIONS:
WHAT WENT WRONG?**

The Polling Failure in New York

by Mark J. Penn and Douglas E. Schoen

As everyone in the polling industry knows, major newspaper polls predicted a landslide for David Dinkins in the election for Mayor of New York City. The *New York Observer* said Dinkins would win by 18 points. A Gallup survey of 3,000 voters put the margin at 14 points, and the *Daily News* came in at 11 points. The actual margin was just 40,000 votes out of 1.8 million cast, or about 2%. In an ideal world, the headlines going into the final days of the campaign would have read: "Dinkins and Giuliani in dead heat." Voters would have been telegraphed the message that their vote could make a difference.

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These polls were off so dramatically for four distinct reasons:

- (1) Some respondents did lie.
- (2) Election turnout was hard to predict.
- (3) A significant swing to Rudolph Giuliani did in fact occur in the final week.
- (4) Media use of raw poll findings lacked certain elements of interpretive judgment.

We have found that respondents in racially-charged situations are especially likely to fudge their answers. Many say they are undecided when they are really leaning toward an unpopular candidate. In each of the New York polls, the undecided vote was almost all white—and whites were voting mostly for Giuliani. We believe that it is appropriate in these situations to divide the undecideds based on how the vote for each racial group is breaking. Such a procedure usually uncovers most, if not all, of the hidden vote for the white candidate. We do the same thing in Jewish/Catholic races or Republican/Democrat races. We divide the undecideds according to the variables which otherwise appear to have the strongest relation to vote intention.

Through this process we told Ed Koch he would lose the New York governor's race in 1982,

and told Senator Frank Lautenberg he would win the New Jersey senate contest that same year. And in 1987, we told Jane Byrne she was within a few points of Harold Washington, when CBS was reporting her behind by 21 points.

Another key requirement for polling in contests where a black candidate is running against a white candidate involves attention to the racial composition of the poll's respondents. Many respondents who in the final analysis won't vote, tell interviewers they will. Pollsters must combine information on registration patterns with data on how much final turnout by the groups has departed from what they have told pollsters in elections past, to estimate black and white turnout realistically. This estimate must then be applied to the tracking polls if trends are to be discerned. Otherwise, an apparent 5-point shift could just be the result of a different racial mix from one sample to the next, not real voter change. Weighting the last polls to a single estimate of the likely racial mix of the actual electorate is absolutely essential.

In this year's New York mayoral race, much of the shift to Giuliani *did* occur late. The debates came at the end of the campaign, along with a new set of accusations against David Dinkins. Press articles raised serious questions about Dinkins' judgment and ability to govern. Quite a few points could have been made up in the last week.

"Opinion polls done for the news media have no mechanism for making such judgments. Who would write, 'The poll showed X in the lead, but our polling director says it's wrong?'"

Those who run many of the public polls are searching for an automatic method of arriving at election estimates — as though the estimates can be lifted right off the computer print-out. Just hand the data to a reporter (who is typically not a polling professional) and let him write them up. In practice, this process works in perhaps 6 or 7 out of every 10 elections. In the other contests, real-world problems in turnout, respondent lying, etc., throw a monkey-wrench into the polling process. When this happens, someone must stand up and say: "The raw results show the race 50%-40%, but the poll is really telling us it's dead even.

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no mechanism for making such judgments. Who would write, "The poll shows X in lead, but our polling director says it's wrong?" Until the media bring themselves to do just that, however, in reporting their poll results in certain contests, they are going to miss the mark badly. The public sometimes lies or acts on semiconscious thoughts, and no improvement in polling technique is going to make it otherwise.

We don't think newspapers and TV stations should back out of polling. Rather, they must be more open to making professional judgments about the figures, more open to the possibility of error. Poll results are often very squishy. In racially charged situations, especially, the figures may easily be off by 10 points or more.

*Mark J. Penn and Douglas E. Schoen are partners
in the firm of Penn and Schoen and Associates, Inc.*

WILSONIANISM ALIVE AND WELL

Would you favor or oppose the reunification East and West Germany?

Favor	76%
Oppose	16
Not Sure	8

NOTE: Survey by Louis Harris & Associates for *Business Week*, November 13-14, 1989.

Because of the events of the past week, there has been talk about East Germany and West Germany reuniting to become one nation. Is the re-unification of Germany something that you would welcome or not welcome?

Welcome	72%
Not welcome	13
Not Sure	14

NOTE: Survey by *Time/CNN/Yankelovich Clancy Shulman*, November 15, 1989.

Do you think West Germany and East Germany should be united as one nation again?

Should	67%
Should not	19
DK/NA	14

NOTE: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, November 26-28, 1989.