

## Projecting the Electoral College Vote From the Popular: The Pundits "Just Don't Get It"

Psephologists in other countries—the UK's David Butler in particular—figured out something which most Americans find very hard to accept: If you know the popular vote nationally, you can make a pretty reliable estimate of how the electoral college votes will come out. There is a widespread misconception that the electoral college vote is somehow almost independent of the national vote. Every four years, particularly close to elections, there are seriously argued columns telling us to ignore the national polls because they only measure the national vote, and to look at the individual states.

Even if we had really good and timely poll data in the individual states (and we only have them for a very few), relying on them would be a mistake. While there are substantial differences in how much individual states swing to, or from, Democrat to Republican, between consecutive elections, the overall distribution of this swing is not far from a normal distribution. The swing from Republican to Democrat between 1988 to 1992 varied from +17% in Arkansas, to -1% in Iowa and North Dakota, but the great majority of states swung by between 5 and 10%. The mean was just over 7%. Based on our final national poll, showing a six-point lead, we estimated that Clinton would win "between 380 and 405 electoral college votes." We didn't base this on state polls. We didn't say

which states Clinton would win. We just assumed a normal distribution of swing.

In the final analysis, we were a little high on Clinton's lead (6 points instead of 5.5); hence, we were also a little high on his share of the electoral college vote. [Clinton won 370 electoral votes.] But the surprising thing to us is that no other pollsters even attempted to make the calculation because they, like most pundits, don't believe you can project the electoral college decision from the national vote.

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# THE PERFORMANCE OF THE GALLUP TRACKING POLL: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

*By Larry Hugick, Guy Molyneux, and Jim Norman*

What really happened in the final weeks of the 1992 presidential campaign? Had the vast majority of voters already made up their minds before this critical period, or did a large segment of still-deciding voters leave the election outcome in doubt? If there were late shifts in candidate support, were they precipitated by campaign-related events or by other factors?

These same questions have been asked about other presidential races of the last three decades—Reagan/Carter in 1980, Carter/Ford in 1976, Nixon/Humphrey in 1968 and Kennedy/Nixon in 1960. Before 1992, however, those searching for answers were frustrated by incomplete polling data. Information had to be drawn from various sources, some employing dissimilar methodologies. Often, there were gaps of several days for which no figures at all were available.

This year was different. For the first time in the history of presidential election polling in the US, new information was available every day at the end of the campaign from three independent sources. The Gallup Organization tracked the race for CNN and USA Today. The ABC News polling unit provided daily figures for its network. A third tracking poll, Battleground '92, was conducted by the Tarrance Group and carried by various media around the country.

All three tracking polls showed essentially the same picture of the race in the final week: It tightened dramatically as George Bush moved to within striking distance of the lead, then widened enough at the end for Bill Clinton to win by a modest, but comfortable, margin.

This valuable glimpse of voter volatility in the campaign's homestretch has

been obscured, however, by a cloud of post-election commentary by poll critics who would have us believe that this narrowing of the race in the final week never happened. Their influence was felt one week after the election, when Newsweek's "Conventional Wisdom" page included the following item under the heading of "polls": "Race never got as close as some said." They struck again in the November/December issue of Public Perspective, when Michael Traugott referred to the tightening of the race as "a developing folklore about the 1992 campaign" (p. 15).

## The Race Did Tighten

It's important to set the record straight. The race did tighten, getting into the too-close-to-call range. And then, it did widen again at the end. Interviews conducted Saturday and Sunday, October 24-25, in

the CNN/USA Today/Gallup tracking poll showed Clinton leading by 9 percentage points, 43 to 34%, among likely voters. Subsequent polling showed Bush gaining ground, closing the gap to 2 points in interviewing conducted Monday and Tuesday (40% Clinton vs. 38% Bush), and 1 point on Wednesday and Thursday (41% Clinton vs. 40% Bush). On the final weekend, however, Clinton regained the momentum, finishing with a 7-point lead in the final two days of polling.

In part as the result of different methodologies, the two other media tracking polls didn't show the gap closing quite as early as CNN/USA Today/Gallup did. Nonetheless, by the Thursday before the election (October 29th), results from the three tracking polls converged. On a likely-voter base, ABC showed the Clinton lead cut to 4 points, Battleground had the race dead even,<sup>1</sup> while as noted, Gallup had it at 1 point. And, all three polls detected a shift back toward Clinton in the final weekend.

In arguing that Clinton's margin over Bush could never have been cut as much as the CNN/USA Today/Gallup tracking poll indicated, poll critics seem to ignore the actual election returns. After all, Clinton's final margin over Bush was only 5.5 points, even though most polls showed the Arkansas Governor with a double-digit lead through mid-October. Clearly, there was some narrowing of the race in the final weeks; at issue is when it occurred and how close Bush came to overtaking Clinton.

If Clinton ended up winning by 5.5 percentage points, it's hardly unreasonable on its face to assume that Bush cut the margin to 1 or 2 points at some point in the final days of the campaign. Sampling error, rounding error, and other factors ensure that we will never know precisely how close Bush came. Keep in mind that most final pre-election polls, including ours, slightly overestimated the Clinton margin. *Unless the swing back toward Clinton at the end was illusory, the race must have been closer before the final weekend.*

When the CNN/USA Today/Gallup tracking poll figures are compared with the election results—rather than other poll results—they seem very credible. Bush's support never rose above 40% in the poll, while he received 38% of the actual vote. Clinton's support never fell below 40%, while he received 43% of the actual vote.

### **It's Our Critics Who Got It Wrong**

Having shown the gap close earlier than did the competition, the CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll received the brunt of the critics' salvos prior to election day. To some degree, this is understandable. It was our poll results, after all, that several tabloids picked up and displayed with screaming headlines. Even in the post-mortems, however, the poll remains a bigger target for criticism than tracking polls generally. Many casual observers have been left with the impression that the poll itself, and the way it was reported, were somehow fundamentally flawed. In fact, the charges of shoddy methodology and misreported results are more applicable to those taking shots at the poll.

To our dismay, many of those who have publicly criticized our poll made no effort to learn the details of the methodology, verify the accuracy of the poll findings at issue, or review the way CNN and USA Today presented the material. In an attempt to contain the spread of misinformation about the poll, we have listed the most common misconceptions and half-truths now in circulation, along with the relevant factual information.

**"The sample size was too small to be reliable."** This charge has no basis in fact. No one committed more resources to presidential polling this year than CNN/USA Today/Gallup. In the campaign's final week, Gallup interviewed *1,000 registered voters each day*. Two-day rolling averages released during that period were based on approximately *1,500 likely voters*. By comparison, the sample size of our non-tracking pre-election polls this year ranged from 600 to 1200 registered voters.

**"Gallup took shortcuts in the tracking poll methodology."** When some critics heard the words "tracking poll," they assumed that it was a string of one-night polls with no callbacks. But this was not the case—our tracking methodology included as many callbacks as other Gallup pre-election polls. Each night of tracking included both first calls, and callbacks to telephone numbers held over from the previous two to three days. Since the survey design allowed ample opportunity for callbacks and the questionnaire was brief and easy to administer, contact rates and cooperation rates—often used to evaluate survey quality—were higher for the tracking poll than for longer interviews conducted over several days.

Some have criticized the tracking poll's respondent-selection procedure as an unacceptable form of convenience sampling. While this method may not satisfy survey research purists, it should be noted that this same procedure has been used for nearly all Gallup telephone surveys since the 1970s. Any serious negative effects on poll accuracy should have been apparent years ago.

**"The narrowing of the gap, and subsequent re-opening, were methodological artifacts."** Michael Traugott speculates that the late shifts in candidate support might have resulted from differences between weekend and weekday interviewing—but fails to examine the tracking poll trendline to test his hypothesis. The poll spanned almost five weeks. If such a bias did exist, there should be a consistent pattern over time of Bush gaining in midweek polling and falling back on the weekend. In fact, when candidate preference results are averaged over the full five week period, figures for weekday interviewing (46% Clinton vs. 34% Bush) show the race no closer than the weekend figures (45% Clinton vs. 33% Bush).

Throughout its history, Gallup has limited interviewing times on weekdays to late afternoon and evening hours (approximately 5 pm to 9 pm) for all general public surveys. Research shows that weekday evenings and weekends (all day) are the times when the highest proportions of

adults are home and free to be interviewed. Some people do work odd hours, attend night classes, or have other reasons to be away from home on weekday evenings. But we have seen no evidence that making a special effort to reach this group significantly improves poll accuracy.

**"The narrowing of the gap resulted from the shift to a likely-voter base."**

While the race was never as close among registered voters as it was among likely voters, both trendlines show Clinton's lead shrinking significantly in the October 26-29 span. During that period, when the margin among likely voters averaged 2 percentage points, it averaged 6 points among all registered voters—down from 11 points in polling the previous week. It was an unfortunate coincidence that we began reporting results for likely voters as the race narrowed dramatically. (The decision on the timing of the switch to likely voters had been made 10 months earlier!) Further complicating matters, registered voter results and likely voter results showed the greatest variation during this period, differing by 4-5 points in the size of Clinton's lead. Earlier (unreported) likely voter figures diverged from registered voter results by no more than 3 points.

Such differences between likely and registered voter results are not unusual. Gallup pre-election polls at the end of the 1988 presidential campaign, for example, showed similar differences. But in 1992, this phenomenon tended to exaggerate the closing of the gap, and confused many pollwatchers. Some critics have claimed that the poll showed the gap narrowing by 9 points in a single day, mistakenly comparing an 11-point margin among registered voters reported on October 27th with a 2-point margin among likely voters reported the following day. In fact, the data show Clinton's lead cut by 4 points among likely voters.

**"The likely-voter base was too restrictive."** Initial criticisms of the poll focused on the Gallup likely-voter scale. Clinton pollster Stanley Greenberg argued that it unfairly excluded young people

and other voter groups inclined to support the Democratic ticket. But if the scale were biased against Clinton voters when it showed the race at its closest point, that bias should have been evident in the final polling. Gallup used the same likely-voter scale, applied in an identical manner, throughout the last two weeks of polling. The final results based on likely voters showed a 7-point Clinton lead when, as mentioned previously, the actual margin of victory was 5.5 points.

The likely-voter scale was developed in the 1950s and has been an integral part of Gallup pre-election poll methodology. The specific questions used have been validated as predictors of actual voting behavior. We acknowledge that the scale may not work equally well with all voter subgroups. In an effort to further refine the likely-voter scale, Gallup is now conducting a new validation study. As in previous elections, however, use of the likely-voter scale improved the accuracy of the final 1992 poll results.

**"CNN and USA Today Failed to Explain the Shift to Likely Voters."**

This has no basis in fact. On October 26, CNN announced the transition and reported figures based on both registered and likely voters. The following day, when the race narrowed to 2 points among likely voters, the network devoted half of its 4:30 pm "Inside Politics" program to a discussion of the scale, the rationale behind it, and how those identified as likely to vote differed from the total registered voter pool. The program was repeated in its late-night time slot and excerpts were aired at other times that day. When USA Today first reported the 2-point gap, the newspaper printed an explanatory box covering these same issues. At no time were the registered-voter figures and the likely-voter figures presented graphically as a continuous time series. CNN always ran the two trendlines separately. USA Today separated the earlier registered-voter figures from the likely-voter trendline with a bold demarcation line and clear labelling.

**Some Questions That Really Deserve Attention**

By creating a controversy about the accuracy of the tracking polls, the critics have diverted attention from important questions we should be asking about the last two weeks of the campaign. These include the following:

\* What actually did account for Bush's comeback?

\* Did Bush temporarily pick up some Republican-oriented Perot voters after Perot's charges of dirty tricks against the GOP were aired on "60-Minutes?"

\* Did the negative publicity generated by the Caspar Weinberger indictment the Friday before election day help Clinton regain the momentum?

\* Did a bloc of voters opposed to the President's re-election make a late switch from Clinton to Perot when Bush's defeat seemed to them to be certain?

\* Do the late shifts in candidate support seen in 1992 and 1980 represent a pattern of voter vacillation typical of presidential elections with an unpopular incumbent?

We don't have all the answers to these questions. We do know, however, that journalists, historians, and political scientists are in a far better position to understand the campaign's final days with the tracking poll data at their disposal than they would have been without them.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The Tarrance Group did not publicly release the likely-voter figure cited.

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