

# PROBLEMS IN EXIT POLLING

## INTERVIEWS WITH WARREN J. MITOFSKY AND JOHN BRENNAN

Warren J. Mitofsky and John Brennan bring a wealth of experience to polling in general, and in particular, to election-day surveys of voters—commonly known as “exit polls.”

Mitofsky joined CBS News in 1967 as chief statistician for election research, where he was credited with conducting the first election-day poll of voters. In 1967, he used in-person interviews at selected voting places in Kentucky to predict the results of that state's governor's race. The data thus obtained were found to be superior to those obtained for other races using telephone interviewing, and Mitofsky resolved never to do election day projections based on anything other than in-person exit polling. His technique for exit polling has subsequently been adopted by every major news organization interested in measuring election-day voting behavior. Mitofsky now heads VRS.

John Brennan joined the ABC News polling unit as a consultant in 1982 and as a full-time staff member in 1983. He was subsequently involved in ABC's survey work, including exit polling, through 1989. In 1990, he joined the Roper Organization and directed its exit polling efforts that year. In 1991, he became director of polling for the Los Angeles Times. The Times was the only other organization, besides VRS, to conduct a substantial complement of exit polls in 1992. It polled in a number of presidential primaries, and conducted a national exit poll on November 3, together with state polls in California and New York.

### INTERVIEW WITH WARREN J. MITOFSKY

**Public Perspective:** You're the “found-ing father” of exit polling. Tell us how the environment for this type of survey re-search has changed in the quarter-century you've been involved.

**Warren J. Mitofsky:** What has changed about the environment since Voter Re-search and Surveys (VRS) was formed in 1990 is that instead of working for one network—the one I used to work for was CBS—I now work for four networks and about one hundred newspapers and local TV stations. I now do everything in public rather than in private. This means that I no longer control what goes on the air and to the newspapers. That's what's different. In 1988, I would have gone over to a writer, or to Dan Rather, or to some other correspondent, and I would have told them what to say about the results. They would not have been writ-ing final stories at mid-day. The inter-pretation would have been a lot more cau-tious early on than some of the interpreta-tions made in today's environment.

**PP:** That's quite a change. What about in the polling itself. Is it harder to get people to complete the exit poll questionnaires now?

**WM:** No. If anything, response rates in 1992 were a little better than 1988. I don't think response rates have become more of a problem.

**PP:** What kind of refusal rates are you getting?

**WM:** It depends on the state. And it depends on how far from the polling place the interviewer is allowed to stand. In 1992, the highest response rate we had was 76%; that came in a couple of rural states.

**PP:** In general, states with low crime, rural areas—they are the high response states? And New York would be low?

**WM:** Yes, New York is a low response state.

**PP:** USA Today published in an early edition on Wednesday, November 4, the day after the election, a big VRS table that showed an 11-point margin for Clinton. Their headline was, “LANDSLIDE.” Clinton in fact won by 5.5 percentage points. What happened?

**WM:** In 1988 we overstated Dukakis's strength and understated Bush's. And in 1992, we overstated Clinton and again understated Bush. There seems to be a rather consistent pattern in the presiden-tial contests toward overstating the Democrat's share of the vote. In these last two national elections, at least, there has been a clear bias in the results. It was slightly bigger in 1992 than in 1988. It runs someplace between 2.5 to 3.5 points on a candidate.

**PP:** I've examined a chart published in the Washington Post the day after the election in 1988, from the ABC/Washing-ton Post exit poll. It showed a Dukakis/Bush race that was virtually a dead heat. So, it isn't just one organization's polling which is overstating the Democratic nomi-nees' strength—it seems to occur what-ever the exit poll.

**WM:** That's probably true. And, if you go back to the Republican primary in New Hampshire this year, where Buchanan's strength against Bush was overstated in the VRS poll, three other exit polls had exactly the same result. So, it's the exit poll process.

**PP:** That's what interests us—that it isn't just one organization, or someone making "a mistake." It's something built into the electorate and the way it responds in today's environment.

**WM:** The only thing it can be is a difference in response rates of supporters of one candidate versus the other. There's no possibility for it to be anything else and be this systematic.

**PP:** What's the cause? Is it that some groups of voters—often but not always Republicans and conservatives—are angrier than others with "the media" and thus more likely to say No to the media's exit polling?

**WM:** No. I would think it has to do with which voters are more motivated. As we saw in the New Hampshire primary, it was the Buchanan voters who were overstated. I think it probably has to do more with the intensity of support of the different groups of voters for their respective candidate. We intend to see if we can learn more about this.

**PP:** What kind of information do you have at present about people who say, "Thanks, but no thanks," when asked to fill out an exit poll questionnaire?

**WM:** For everybody who doesn't respond, we get approximate age, sex, and race. We have the interviewers keep track of these items. We make a non-interview adjustment based on these data.

**PP:** Does it help?

**WM:** It helps particularly with age. We clearly have more refusals among older people than among the young or the middle-aged. But, obviously, it doesn't eliminate the problem of overestimating some candidates—notably, Dukakis's and Clinton's—proportions of the vote.

**PP:** Now, this overstatement—of the Democrats' margin, at least in presidential general election voting—is this something new? Did anything like it show up in the exit polls you did in the 1970s?

**WM:** I don't know. We have some relevant data which we want to incorporate in a study we're planning to do soon. We want to examine it to see what correlates of the bias we can come up with. We've done such work in the past, but I don't think we've looked long enough or hard enough or systematically enough.

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This might be a good time to tell your readers a bit more about how we proceed in an exit poll's tabulations. After the polls close on election night, we get actual vote returns. We take them and compute the magnitude of the bias in our survey data. Of course we learn more about this matter as the night goes along, and we get more actual vote data. For example, in 1992 we called Clinton the winner in Georgia just when the polls closed—something we clearly wouldn't have done had we realized the vote was as close as it proved to be. Shortly after the polls closed, we started to get actual vote counts. From them we could see the size of the bias in our Georgia poll numbers. Our exit poll overstated Clinton's proportion by a little more than 3 percentage points—that's not just bias; it's bias plus sampling error—and it's about double that on the difference between Bush and Clinton. That's what led us to call Clinton early, when, as it turned out, we shouldn't have. We didn't do that with any states that closed later than 7 pm because we got a fairly good idea of what was happening from the 6 pm and 7 pm states: The poll's were overestimating Clinton's margin.

In the past, I had control over that flow of exit poll information. This year, every single news organization that par-

ticipated with VRS could look at poll information from the middle of the day on—and many of them were drawing conclusions from mid-day results. You shouldn't do that. But they did. And some of them printed the early poll results.

**PP:** For example, USA Today headlined its story, "Landslide," on a race that turned out to have a modest 5.5 point margin.

**WM:** The difference between the final margin and what USA Today had was about 5.5 points. Let's call it 6 points for argument's sake. That's about 3 points on a candidate. That's not a good estimate from an exit poll as large as this one was. It needs to be noted that though the poll's overall estimate was off, the relationships showing as to how various groups voted didn't change once we corrected the poll's bias. All in all, I think we did a good job, but I am not happy with the estimate at poll-closing time. When I was at CBS we never reported the overall estimate from the exit poll. We waited for the actual vote counts in the sample precincts to estimate the percentages.

**PP:** Let's look at the 1992 VRS data from another angle. We've been working with your data extensively, and it seems to us that they represent a richer collection than we've ever seen in the past.

**WM:** This is a fantastic dataset: The most comprehensive, the best ever, without question. With regard to all the talk about researchers being deprived of good data because the networks have pooled things—that's absolutely wrong. Two things happened as a result of the VRS process: One is we got a much richer set of questions than we ever had when I did polls alone at CBS. The second thing it has done is make the coverage much more extensive than it's ever been. We didn't do just one national exit poll, we did three. There are actually three different questionnaires. Also, there were surveys in every state including the District of Columbia, and two separate questionnaires in California. That's an enormous amount of data. We tallied interviews from over 70,000 people. We interviewed more

than twice that many, more than 140,000 people. (We can't tally all of it. We subsample it.) That's an enormous data collection job—unprecedentedly extensive.

**PP:** What do you see as the main value of exit polling?

**WM:** There are two values. One is being able to have the analytic data to tell what the election means and what voters are signalling that they want. Giving people a bigger, clearer voice is important. How could this be achieved without good analytic data?

The other use of the exit polls has to do with projections. I don't want to minimize this value. Projections provide the television networks with a chance to put

on a coherent broadcast. Before we used exit polls for projections, I remember the sense of frustration in the studio as coverage shifted erratically from one set of early tabulations to another, with no sense of direction. Being able to present coverage in some organized fashion for most of the contests has made reporting much more effective. Election night on the networks may have been exciting in the old days, if you liked horseraces, but it surely wasn't productive if you wanted to learn much about what had happened. Now, election night coverage tells the story with some depth and precision.

**PP:** What's the biggest change you would like to make in your exit poll procedures in the future?

**WM:** I wouldn't make the early results available at all. I don't believe anybody needs them at mid-day. I don't believe the release of such early cuts serves any useful purpose. If the media had the results an hour before poll closing, that would serve them just fine. The problems that accrue from early release far outweigh the gains.

**PP:** We'll be interested in learning what reaction you get to this idea.

**WM:** Oh, I won't succeed. That's going to be my proposal. I'll pursue it again. But I don't think anyone will buy it. The reigning idea is that everybody's entitled to everything. But we're going to continue to have problems as long as that's what transpires.

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BRENNAN

**Public Perspective:** Are we seeing developments now which make it harder than it used to be for an exit poll to get a reliable estimate of how the electorate has voted?

**John Brennan:** Let me first give you a sense of the data on which I'll be basing my answer. I wasn't involved in the 1980 ABC News exit poll, but I have reviewed its data. Since I was at ABC in 1984 and 1988, I am, of course, very familiar with those two exit polling efforts. I directed the 1992 Los Angeles Times election day survey, and I've reviewed the exit polls that the Times did in the two preceding elections.

Looking at this collection of data, it's not the case that we see an absolutely consistent pattern—namely, one where the exit polls were experiencing little difficulty coming up with reliable estimates for a time, only to encounter such problems more recently. There were problems in some local races early on—in the 1981 New Jersey governor's race, for example. On the other hand, in the Louisiana gubernatorial race last year—between Edwin Edwards and David Duke—many observers thought that an exit poll would have a

terrible problem getting a reliable estimate. Supposedly, many Duke backers would be reluctant to acknowledge publicly their vote for a man widely depicted as a racist. In fact, I believe the VRS exit poll in Louisiana was right on the money. And most of the exit polls in the 1992 presidential primaries were problem free. So it's not a case that there's some uniform trend.

Having said this, my sense is that we are clearly having increasing difficulties in getting reliable estimates for national general elections. In 1980 and 1984, in both the Carter/Reagan contest and the Mondale/Reagan race, the ABC exit polling data were very close to the mark. In 1988, however, ABC overstated the Dukakis vote in a number of states. This year, both national exit polls overstated the Democratic candidate's margin in the presidential contest.

Before this year, we had found generally that those who vote earlier in the day are relatively more Republican, and that as election day proceeds the vote shifts in the Democratic direction. So, this year I was actually expecting to see a Bush lead in the early exit poll data, or at least a very

close race. That did not happen. We saw a large, consistent Clinton margin in our data throughout the day.

So, we are now experiencing greater difficulties, I think, in exit poll estimations: In the presidential races of 1988 and 1992, exit polls generally overstated the Democratic candidates' margin; and in 1992 our polls showed Clinton's margin larger throughout the day than it was ultimately to prove. In trying to get a handle on the source of this problem, we need to note that it's not necessarily the case that we're now experiencing higher levels of refusals than in the past. On the basis of my experience at least, nothing much seems to be happening to the overall level of nonresponse in recent-year exit polls. Different organizations compute it somewhat differently; based on the way we compute it at the LA Times, our response rate nationally has been running in the 65% or so range, with little variation evident from election to election. My concern is that nonresponse is becoming *more selective*—higher, that is, among those with one partisan coloration than with another.

Just one more word before we go on. I've said that in general my review of the

data suggests that in 1988 and 1992, many exit polls had a tougher time than they had previously. Even here, there is at least one exception. The 1988 Los Angeles Times national poll—which I did not direct, but

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have reviewed—seems to have come up with a very good estimate. The real frustration is that the problem seems to come and go.

**PP:** I know that you monitor your exit poll responses very closely as the election day proceeds. When did you first get an inkling this year that there were problems with your estimate of the partisan distribution?

**JB:** When I reviewed the first wave of data from the poll, I looked at my party ID numbers and knew right away that we were understating the Republican side. The proportion of our respondents describing themselves as Republicans was simply too low—based on everything we know about the distribution of party identification.

We know something about the characteristics of the electorate at various points in the vote count from earlier elections. When we get our early data we examine them to see whether the sample to that point looks like what we've seen at comparable points in previous races. We ask ourselves: Are we overstating or understating the size of a particular group? Of course, if a particular group is more heavily represented this year than in the past, it may be that that group is actually turning out in higher proportions this year. Nonetheless, an overrepresentation or underrepresentation, compared to previous elections, of a particular group is a warning signal. And, as I've said, this

year we showed a higher Democratic proportion than in past contests. I didn't see anything else anomalous in our sample—only that we had a Democratic party ID advantage substantially higher than I would have thought it would be. Age, gender, race, etc., all looked within range.

**PP:** You've said that the progression of exit-poll estimates over time doesn't show some neat pattern, but that since 1988 the problem of getting a good estimate seems more formidable. What's been happening to cause this?

**JB:** Let's remember that we're talking about general elections here. As a result of the difficulties we encountered on November 3, I'm investigating the pattern of nonresponse at all 200 of our exit-poll points. For example, I've already found that the bias tends to be worse in some points than others. The challenge is to identify the cause of the bias at these locations. I've also conducted two focus groups of my California and my New York interviewers, to try to get a sense of what they're experiencing in the field. This focus group information is anecdotal, of course, and I'm not yet through with analyzing it.

One of the things that we know is that most of the refusals we're getting occur prior to the introduction of the questionnaire. That is, it's not a case of people looking over the ballot, thinking that it's too complicated, or that the lettering is too small, or whatever else, and then refusing. They're refusing to participate right up front, the moment they're approached. Interviewers in both California and New York said this year that many of the refusees said they were too busy, or something like this.

But notably in both California and New York, a substantial number of the turndowns expressed concern about early projections of the vote by the networks. I wasn't surprised to hear this in California, given later poll closings here, but I was surprised to hear it from New Yorkers. We also heard from the Los Angeles area interviewers that a number of those who refused to participate commented to the

effect that the press was biased in favor of liberals. This is, of course, the kind of thing I'm sensitive to. It connects with the pattern of nonresponse that we're getting, an apparent understatement of Republicans.

I've done telephone polling on confidence in newspapers and television, and in the course of this work asked an open-ended question on how newspapers help people make decisions in the political process, and what respondents think the press needs to do to perform better. When I examined the demography of confidence in newspapers, I found that those with the least confidence were clustered at the conservative end of the ideological scale. And when respondents are asked in the open-ended question how the press could do a better job, the most-mentioned response was that it should be less biased.

One has to hypothesize that the political environment of this election created a certain amount of resentment toward the press on the part of Bush supporters and Republicans, which translated into a higher level of refusals among such voters to participate in the media's exit polls. We have to face the possibility that more people are perceiving the media as biased or insensitive because of early projections, and this may be contributing significantly to our nonresponse problem.

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Now, a lot of people say, "All you have to do is weight for nonresponse." You can take the demographics of those who turn you down, and build upon that a meaningful adjustment of your overall sample. That sounds great, but there are a couple of problems. First, it's an enormous job to do anything of this kind reliably as election day is proceeding. If one had a couple of extra days, one could

make a lot of refinements. But the bottom line is that we must deliver correct estimates on election day. More to the point, here, while weighting for nonresponse does seem to improve the sample from the standpoint of demographic make-up, it doesn't seem to have much impact on the margin between the candidates. For example, if it wasn't elderly voters in general who were turning us down in greater proportions, but *elderly Bush voters*, we couldn't have gotten a better estimate by collecting information on the approximate age of those who refused and then weighting our sample accordingly. If Bush voters among the elderly refused disproportionately, weighting up the elderly in our sample would in fact have exacerbated the problem, by giving disproportionate weight to *elderly Clinton voters*.

**PP:** You're probably more than a bit frustrated that many of your kibitzers don't quite understand how complicated the exit poll task is.

**JB:** In my experience, your reputation is only as good as your last point spread between the candidates. If you can't get the point spread correct, you're going to have major credibility problems with all

of your work. We know that it's our obligation to do what we can to get our numbers right. Still, I do wish more people understood how enormously complex the exit poll task is. Exit polling is really more akin to the mall intercept

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interviews of market research than it is to the very highly controlled, random-digit-dialing-telephone-center type of surveys that we conduct in our regular public opinion and pre-election polling. Also, it's so much more of a challenge to field a staff of exit poll interviewers around the country than it is to put 60 or 70 people together in a telephone interview center. The personality of the interviewer becomes much more important in the exit

poll environment. The cooperation or lack of cooperation of election officials and what they say in the polling station to voters about the survey that's going on outside can be critical. There's no way that we can police places from Billings, Montana to Waco, Texas, to Jacksonville, Florida all day long to the extent that we would like to.

In addition, it needs to be remembered that we can't overload our interviewers and our computers with too many tasks. Interviewers already have a lot to do—besides collecting the data—from going to the election officials and getting turnout figures, to phoning in their poll results as the day proceeds. If you give the interviewers too much to do, you can simply overload them, to the detriment of the overall exit poll process. Besides this, there is only a certain amount of information that we can process with available manpower and the limited amount of time on election day. Overall, I think, those of us engaged in exit polling are doing a pretty good job in a complex undertaking. Nonetheless, I feel that an ongoing methodological review is absolutely necessary.