

Incumbent Races: A National Perspective

by Nick Panagakis

In the traditional analysis of pre-election voting preference data, undecided response has generally been interpreted literally. Undecided voters are thought to be ambivalent between candidates, so their percentage is expected to split about evenly between candidates on election day. Unconditional probability is assumed, and poll point spreads are used to characterize the race. Most media still rely upon this traditional assumption about undecided voters, and it continues to lead to incorrect characterizations of poll findings. Moreover, this assumption unfairly adds to a challenger's campaign burden by exaggerating the incumbent's lead.

“*When full-term incumbents faced conventional challengers, there was no case in which the incumbent picked up more percentage points than the challenger on election day.*”

In the first polls we conducted in the late 70s, a different pattern emerged, one which appeared to be at odds with the traditional assumption of undecided vote behavior. In races where an incumbent was seeking re-election each poll seemed to estimate support for the incumbent accurately; but on election day, most or all of the undecided voters appeared to cast a ballot for the challenger. I believe this happened not because undecided voters were undecided *between* the candidates but, because they were undecided *about* the incumbent, the candidate they knew best, the one with a public record.

A Look at State and Local Races

Later research on this subject was based on hundreds of late/final media-sponsored polls on state and local incumbent races collected from across the country.¹ The pattern in these analyses was clear. In incumbent races, there was no empirical evidence to substantiate that undecided voters should split equally. Depending on the year, undecided voters appeared to decide in favor of the challenger in about 70% of the polls. Equal or near-equal splits of undecided voters, the traditional expectation, were actually exceptions and not the rule. This means that most of these races were closer than they appeared in the polls.

One possible explanation for this pattern is that it is easier to decide whether or not to vote for an incumbent than it is to decide about a relatively unknown challenger. Just as voters with party preferences find it easier to decide who they will vote for earlier than independents do, those who favor an incumbent are unlikely to postpone their vote choice.

Polls which are the “exceptions” to this general finding tend to be consistent with the notion that these undecided voters are undecided about the incumbent, not between the candidates. These polls included short-term incumbents who have not sufficiently established a public record and challengers who have held the same office, or an office similar to the one they are seeking—challengers we call “incumbent-like.” Results in these cases were mixed. There were also cases of incumbents who got a “wake-up” call in the closing days of the campaign and changed strategies to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, as well as some exceptions that might be due to sampling error.

A question raised about the pattern we noticed was that in typical come-from-behind races, challengers might benefit from a trend that continues or even begins after these polls are taken. Alternatively, national opinion polls interview right up to election day and would rule out any inherent trends favoring challengers in the earlier polls. For this reason, we now turn to national poll data.

The National Polls

Looking at the 36 polls in Table 1, we see that the national polls do confirm what we have found at the state and local level.

In the 1996 presidential race, the distribution was clearly skewed, with seven of nine polls showing challengers, primarily Dole, picking up two-thirds or more of the undecideds. And challengers got the majority of the undecideds in one other poll.

In 1992, when Ross Perot was more of a factor, he picked up two-thirds or more of the undecided vote in five of six final pre-election polls. In the sixth case, undecideds split equally between George Bush and Perot. It could be speculated that the character issues which had been raised about Clinton made him as well known as the incumbent on an issue important to many.

Results in 1984 were mixed: Undecideds in two polls split evenly to equal the election day point spread. But in 1984 Walter Mondale was an “incumbent-like” challenger because he had been vice president in the administration defeated by Ronald Reagan in 1980. According to Mayer and McManus, “Reagan won because his skilled campaign team had succeeded in framing the election as a choice between the bad old days of the Carter-Mondale past and Reagan.”² In 1980, challenger Reagan picked up far more undecideds than incumbent Jimmy Carter in each of the final polls.

**FINAL NATIONAL POLL RESULTS
(Prior To Allocation of Undecided Voters)**

Point Change From Final Poll to Election Day Result

1996	Clinton	Dole	Perot	Undecided	Clinton	Dole	Perot	Net to Challenger
Election Result	50%	41%	9%					
CBS/NYT	53	35	9	3%	-3%	6%	0%	6%
PSR/Pew Research	49	36	8	7	1	5	1	6
ABC News	51	39	7	3	-1	2	2	4
Harris	50	38	8	3	0	3	1	4
NBC/WSJ	49	37	9	5	1	4	0	4
Gallup	48	40	6	6	2	1	3	4
ICR/Politics Now	49	37	11	3	1	4	-2	2
Hotline/Battleground	45	36	8	1	5	5	1	6
Zogby	44	37	7	12	6	4	2	6
1992	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Undecided	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Net to Challenger
Election Result	38%	43%	19%					
Harris	37	43	16	3%	1%	0%	3%	3%
Gallup	36	44	14	6	2	-1	5	4
NBC/WSJ	36	44	15	5	2	-1	4	3
CBS/NYT	37	45	15	3	1	-2	4	2
ABC News	37	44	16	3	1	-1	3	2
Washington Post	35	43	16	6	3	0	3	3
1984	Reagan	Mondale	Undecided	Reagan	Mondale	Net to Challenger		
Election Result	59%	41%						
Gordon Black/USA	61	34	5%	-2%	7%	9%		
CBS/NYT	58	37	5	1	4	3		
Gallup	57	39	4	2	2	0		
ABC News	57	39	4	2	2	0		
Harris	55	43	2	4	-2	-6		
Roper	51	41	8	8	0	-8		
1980	Carter	Reagan	Anderson	Undecided	Carter	Reagan	Anderson	Net to Challenger
Election Result	42%	52%	7%					
CBS	43	44	8	4%	-1%	8%	-1%	7%
Gallup	43	47	8	2	-1	5	-1	4
Harris/ABC	41	46	9	3	1	6	-2	4
NBC/AP	36	42	10	9	6	10	-3	7
1976	Ford	Carter	McCarthy	Undecided	Ford	Carter	McCarthy	Net to Challenger
Election Result	48%	51%	1%					
Gallup	47	50	2	5%	1%	5%	-1%	4%
Harris/ABC	45	46	3	5	3	5	-2	3
CBS	41	45	2	12	7	6	-1	5
Time/Yankelovich	41	44	8	6	7	7	-7	0
1972	Nixon	McGovern	Undecided	Nixon	McGovern	Net To Challenger		
Election Result	62%	38%						
ORC	60	31	9%	2%	7%	5%		
Gallup	61	35	4	1	3	2		
Harris	59	35	6	3	3	0		
1964	Johnson	Goldwater	Undecided	Johnson	Goldwater	Net To Challenger		
Election Result	61%	39%						
Gallup	61	32	7%	0%	7%	7%		
Harris	62	33	5	-1	6	7		
ORC	62	29	9	-1	10	11		
1956	Eisenhower	Stevenson	Undecided	Eisenhower	Stevenson	Net To Challenger		
Election Result	58%	42%						
Gallup	57	39	4%	1%	3%	2%		

Note: For the official election results, the vote percent for "other" candidates has been calculated out.

In 1976, Gerald Ford provided a clear example of a short-term incumbent, having assumed the office without even being elected vice president. This was the only case other than 1984 when results were mixed. In all other years when full-term incumbents faced conventional challengers, there was no case in which the incumbent picked up more percentage points than the challenger on election day.

In 1972, two of three final polls showed the challenger gaining most of the undecideds. In 1964, short-term incumbent Lyndon Johnson lost all of the undecideds to Barry Goldwater. But Johnson had served as vice president. And, in 1956, the Gallup poll showed most undecided voters favoring the challenger.

A word about the polls in races with no incumbent, which do not appear in the table: In 1988 and 1960, five of six polls showed more undecideds voting against candidates who had been vice presidents in preceding administrations, George Bush and Richard Nixon. In 1968, more undecideds went to Nixon in one poll and more went to Hubert Humphrey in another.

In 26 of 36 cases (or 72%), the national polls confirm what we have found at the state and local level: More undecideds appear to vote for the challenger. Undecideds split equally in six cases, and three of these were consistent with our description of exceptions. Undecideds appeared to vote for the incumbent in four cases, all of which could be described as exceptions.

In closing, note that this analysis supports the characterization that most incumbent poll leads are closer than they

appear. However, this is not a system for allocating the undecided vote (which is often presumed whenever the subject of undecided voters comes up). If anything, past analysis of

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state and local polls shows no pattern for allocating percentage points and indicates this would be difficult to attempt when one considers that one-fourth of state and local polls generally overstate the incumbent's percentage.

Endnotes:

¹ See, “Incumbent Races Closer Than They Appear,” *Polling Report*, February 27, 1989; and Thomas Gruca, “Expecting the Unexpected: The Problem of Undecided Voters,” *Public Perspective*, Vol. 5, No. 5, (1994), pp. 24-26.

²J. Mayer and D. McManus, *Landslide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988) p. 7.



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