
Chapter 3

the poll were black, a group voting almost unanimously for the Democrat. Given that blacks made up only 12% of the electorate in Maryland's last mid-term election, this seemed high, and was the subject of some puzzled discussion in the newsroom and among state political pollsters, who seized on this discrepancy to cast doubt on our result.

As it happened, black turnout in Maryland was 21%—higher than in the 1996 presidential election. The Democratic incumbent won handily.

The Polls vs. the Conventional Wisdom

By Brad Bannon

If I learned anything during the 1998 campaign, and I would like to think I did, it was something I should have learned a long time ago: Trust the numbers and forget about the conventional wisdom. “Conventional wisdom” has become as much an oxymoron in politics as “free agency” has in sports. With the proliferation of pontificating pundits (not to be confused with the nattering nabobs of negativism), the conventional wisdom is becoming more commonplace and conventional all the time. It also is becoming more difficult to resist even for people like me, who have been trained to go by the numbers. And in the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I have on occasion accepted and even articulated the conventional wisdom.

“ *Democrats picked up seats in the House and avoided losses in the Senate by boldly calling for higher government spending to hire new school teachers and tighter government regulations to prevent HMO abuses.* ”

Even though there was little public opinion data to demonstrate the point, the basic piece of conventional wisdom dominating the 1998 campaign was the Democratic party would lose seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. This conventional wisdom was based primarily on assumptions that the Democratic party would take a hit in 1998 because of the President's sex scandal and because losses were inevitable, since the president's party always loses strength in off-year elections, especially in the sixth year of a president's term.

Democrats Led the Trial Heats

The pundits had established the conventional wisdom about Democratic prospects, or the lack thereof, early on even

Though we mentioned the high number of black likely voters in our coverage of the race, we did so more as a caveat than as a story about possible turnout. The lessons from this, which we seem to relearn every election, are simple: Trust your poll. Ignore the pundits. Use the turnout screens to characterize the shape of the electorate, and not merely to estimate the horse race.

And keep the resume up-to-date (bad things sometimes happen to good pollsters.)

though there was survey data demonstrating that a Democratic demise was unlikely. National surveys by the Pew Research Center conducted in January, February, and March 1998 indicated that Democratic candidates had leads of 10, 9, and 12 points, respectively, over Republican candidates in generic congressional trial heats. Further, the public's indifference to the President's embarrassing relationship with Monica Lewinsky should have been apparent with the Democratic lead in the trial heats remaining steady in the two months following the Monicamania outbreak. Even on election eve, a Gallup poll indicated that Democrats had a four-point lead among likely voters. There should have been little surprise when the Democrats picked up House seats.

Missing from the conventional wisdom was the fact that national surveys indicated there was enough popular support for the Democrats' strong activist agenda to overcome a presidential scandal and to stop voters from scratching the six-year itch. For instance, a national survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in January 1998 showed that three out of four Americans supported Democratic proposals to increase federal spending for education, reform HMOs, and raise the minimum wage.

This brings us to the post-election conventional wisdom, which appears to have as little to do with public opinion data as the pre-election wisdom did. The conventional spin on the election outcome was that Democrats won because they had presented a moderate face to the electorate, and Republicans lost because they were so obsessed with the Clinton sex scandal they did not communicate an agenda to voters.

Democratic success was not a victory for moderation or caution. Democrats picked up seats in the House and avoided losses in the Senate by boldly calling for higher government spending to hire new schoolteachers and tighter government regulation to prevent HMO abuses. This agenda also played a key role in stimulating turnout among union members and African-Americans. The Voter News Service national exit

poll showed that education was the most important issue, and voters that had education on their minds supported Democratic candidates by a two-to-one margin. Since the election, national surveys continue to show a great deal of support for more spending on education and closer monitoring of HMOs; and the fact that the public is more likely to trust Democrats to

handle important issues like these suggests Republicans lost seats because they had the wrong agenda, not because they didn't have one at all.

From now on, I am going to pay more attention to the numbers and less attention to the conventional wisdom. I hope you do, too.

Reading the Electorate: Internet-Based Polls Were Shown to Work

By Humphrey Taylor

The most dramatic and revolutionary polling event this past election season was the successful use of Internet-based polling, a development which marks an important milestone in polling history.

- In 1936, Gallup's success, and the *Literacy Digest's* failure, established the credibility of "scientific polling," and showed that sample design is more important than sample size.
- In 1948, Truman's come-from-behind victory discredited quota sampling (in the US, if not elsewhere), and pointed to the need for continuing to poll as late as possible.
- In 1980, telephone polls replaced in-person polls as the

preferred methodology for most opinion polls and election predictions.

Now, a new landmark must be added to this list:

- In 1998, Internet-based polling was shown to be a reliable methodology for opinion polls and election prediction.

The remorseless rise of the Internet, like the Energizer Bunny, just keeps on going. According to the latest Harris data, based on 2,023 interviews conducted in October and November, fully 45% of all adults have access to the Internet (see Table 1). This includes people who access the Internet from their homes, their workplaces, their colleges, or other locations.

The pace of Internet growth has been truly astonishing. Internet penetration—using Harris' definition—has grown from 7% of all adults in September 1995, just a little over three years ago, to almost 20% by September 1996, to 30% in June 1997, to 37% by mid-1998. By early 1999, more than half of all adults will be on-line.

The latest Harris numbers also show that, more and more, the demographic profile of the on-line population resembles the whole country. As the total number of people on-line has increased, the differences between the Internet population and the total population have diminished. For example, African Americans have grown from 1% of the on-line population to 11%, and women from 21% to 49% (see Table 2).

However, the on-line population in general, and those choosing to respond to our *Harris Poll On-Line* surveys in particular, are still very different from the total population. Quite substantial weighting is needed to correct for biases in telephone surveys, particularly with relation to age and income. Even more weighting is needed to correct for the substantial biases in the on-line samples.

**Table 1:
The Increasing On-Line Population**

All adults using the Internet	
1998	
October/November	45%
May/June	37
1997	
November/December	36%
May/June	30
April/May	27
1996	
September	19%
April	15
1995	
November	10%
September	7

Note: "On-line" is defined as accessing the Internet, the World Wide Web, or an on-line service at home, work, or some other location. The data for 1995 and 1996 are based on nationwide cross-sections of 1,000. The data for 1997 and 1998 are based on rolling averages for samples of 2,000 adults.

Source: Surveys by Louis Harris and Associates.

Telephone and On-line Survey Methodologies Compared

The most common criticism of on-line polling is that, unlike telephone research, it is not based on probability sam-