

MEDIA POLLING IN MICHIGAN: A CASE FOR STRICTER STANDARDS

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The biggest electoral surprise November 6 was the upset of James Blanchard in Michigan. Polling reported by both major Detroit newspapers within three days of the election showed Blanchard with at least a 14 point lead over challenger John Engler. Yet when the last vote was counted, Michigan had a new governor; Jim Blanchard, whom some had mentioned as a possible vice presidential candidate, found his political career on hold or perhaps over. The fact that no one seems to have been able to forecast Engler's upset victory begs the question, "What went wrong with the polling?"

There is no easy answer. In part, political polling in off years is more difficult because voter turnout is harder to predict. Then, too, polling performance this year seemed more erratic than in past years. Even some of the best-established political polling firms found their numbers were off target. These off-year polling problems were exacerbated in the media polling by what appears to have been a combination of questionable methodologies and flawed interpretation of the results. All of these elements came together in Michigan.

Problems with the Detroit News Polls

The Detroit Free Press polls seem to have performed fairly well throughout the campaign. As late as November 1, they reported a 52% to 37% spread among all voters, but just a 46% to 42% margin for Blanchard among likely voters. On the other hand, the Detroit News polls were consistently off target. As late as November 4, they reported Blanchard ahead by a "comfortable fourteen points" among likely voters.

It is difficult to say exactly what went wrong with the Detroit News polling. However, they used an unorthodox Ballot Test question which appears to have been biased in favor of the incumbent. Some have speculated that they completed at least one poll in only one night, which could lead to a less representative sample. Repeated calls to the Detroit News and to the firm that did their polling failed to get the information needed to confirm or reject this speculation.

It is clear, however, that the Detroit News' final poll was far off the mark. And because it was published after the last Detroit Free Press poll, it set expectations for most of those who were following the race.

Errors of Interpretation

Not only did the Free Press have more accurate polling results, its interpretation was also more on target. Though an accurate interpretation is obviously enhanced by more accurate results, even the Free Press had Blanchard ahead by 15 points among all voters. But its headline read: "Engler Gaining; New Poll Says 12% Undecided." And the lead paragraph went on: "Republican challenger, John Engler, down by about 20 points in the race for Michigan governor just a month ago, has pulled to within striking range of Governor James Blanchard, a Free Press/WXYZ poll shows." The story continued: "Among 800 registered voters surveyed by Market Opinion Research last week-end, Blanchard appears to hold a comfortable 15 percentage point lead over Engler, 52%-37%. But when the survey looked at likely voters, Blanchard led Engler 46%-42%, meaning the race could be a virtual tie considering the poll's 4.4% margin of error.... Polling experts believe likely voters are a better gauge of the electorate's leanings..."

In contrast, the Detroit News headline published three days later read, "Blanchard Well Ahead 54% to 40%" The story told readers that "Governor James J. Blanchard's lead over Republican challenger John Engler has narrowed, but is still a comfortable 14 points two days before Election Day.... Experts said the survey, conducted Thursday through Saturday, indicates Blanchard is poised to win a third term barring defections to Engler or a dismal voter turnout in areas of Democratic strength. By every historical criteria...a 14-point lead is very strong for Blanchard at this point in the election."

The Detroit News made three basic errors of interpretation—errors not uncommon in media polling across the country. First, there was an overreliance on the ballot test as THE measure of a candidate's position in the race. While the ballot test is the single best measure, it is only part of a larger picture that can't be fully understood without looking at other measurements. American Viewpoint's internal polling for the Engler campaign in early October also picked up what the Detroit Free Press was reporting. We showed the race at 51% for Blanchard, 36% for Engler. While these results didn't look promising on the surface, the total body of findings did look good for the Engler campaign. For instance, among those familiar with both candidates, Blanchard's margin over Engler was just 48% to 39%. When an incumbent is under 50% in a two-way race, it's a sign of vulnerability. Similarly, over five months of intense campaigning, the Blanchard campaign was unable to make any measurable improvement on the question of whether he deserved re-election. So, while we knew Engler was still behind, we also knew he was by no means out of it.

A second problem concerns a failure to take turnout into account satisfactorily. By reporting the opinions of all registered voters, one is tacitly assuming that voter turnout will be 100%, which is patently absurd. In Michigan, turnout was around 40%. While American Viewpoint had Blanchard substantially ahead among all voters, it showed the race a dead heat, 42% Blanchard/41% Engler, among those who said they always vote. Although a turnout model based on a single question is clearly of limited value, it is far better than ignoring the turnout issue altogether.

The third problem of interpretation lies in the fact that the media often lack an understanding of the dynamics of political campaigns. Though this article is far too short to go into this matter in any depth, two examples may be helpful. First, in about 80% of the races that include a high profile incumbent, most of the undecided voters go to the challenger. The theory suggests that if, after a term in office and an extended reelection campaign, an incumbent hasn't been able to persuade voters that he should be reelected by the week before the election, he won't ever be able to do so. Applying this to the last Free Press poll, we see that the race was well within reach of the Engler campaign. Second, in an off year election turnout will be lower than in presidential years, and the ability of a candidate's organization to get the vote out is very important. In this election John Engler had a clear organizational advantage.

The Need To Reform News Media Election Polling

Public polls can have a direct impact on how voters perceive candidates and elections. We all accept that the media should not call a race on election night *before the polls close*. Can we accept the media's, in essence, calling a race *before the polls open*? If the basis for calling it is flawed, of course, the whole problem is compounded.

It can be argued that it's not the media's place to interpret the data, only to report them. It can also be argued that a political interpretation of the data would be, at least to some extent, subjective and that this could lead to a vast array of new problems. On the other hand, incomplete or inaccurate reporting of results can lead to any number of problems—including what has occurred in Michigan. Governor Blanchard has suggested that inaccurate or incomplete reporting of polling results may have led to his defeat by holding down voter turnout. We know that voter turnout was in fact down significantly in some areas, including heavily Democratic Wayne County. Had turnout been normal there, Blanchard could have picked up enough additional votes to win.

Did media polling contribute to the low Wayne County turnout? All we can be sure of is that polls by the media

may affect voter attitudes, and that the media have a civic responsibility to do everything possible to assure the accuracy of published polling results.

Suggested Standards

The press should develop some new standards for its political polling and adhere to them. At minimum these standards should include the following:

1. All significant methodological considerations should be reported. These would include the survey dates, sample size, margin of error, and any respondent weighting. The National Council on Public Polls makes these stipulations in its guidelines.

2. The poll should report the trial heat for all registered voters and for likely voters, and it should explain how the latter are determined. Where there is an incumbent, it should ask whether he deserves re-election, and report those findings.

3. Minimum standards for interpreting the data should also be developed. The average consumer of media coverage can't be expected to interpret polling results for himself. For instance, a fair reporting of results should stress that the Ballot Test among all voters is fairly meaningless in an election where the turnout is expected to be low. Similarly, a headline that screams Candidate A leads by 15%, coupled with an article that explains that among likely voters the race is close, is equally misleading.

4. The media should use polling firms with well-established reputations in the field of political research whenever possible. These days it seems that anyone with access to a phone bank is a pollster, and every pollster does political polling. We seem to have forgotten that interpreting poll results is a demanding science and that political polling is a distinct sub-specialty.

Political polling is difficult. In an off-year, it's even more so. Even well established political polling firms can produce findings that don't accurately reflect voter attitudes. When these problems are coupled with the inadequacies found in much of the media polling, the results can be highly misleading. Journalists can't be expected to have the sophistication of professional political pollsters. But they do have a civic obligation to do everything possible to assure that their poll findings and interpretations are as accurate and complete as humanly possible.

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