

THE POLLS IN 1992: VIEWS OF TWO CRITICS

A GENERALLY GOOD SHOWING, BUT MUCH WORK NEEDS TO BE DONE

By Michael W. Traugott

It was the best of times and—on occasion—the worst of times for pollsters and journalists who reported on polls in the 1992 presidential campaign. Most pollsters are justly satisfied with their work. But there were some ominous signs that some pollsters need to be more vigilant about how they do their work, and reporters more careful about how they write about the findings.

Around the time of the New Hampshire primary, there were two signs of trouble. One involved the first exit poll of the year, and the other initial reporting of the “character” issue. Later, the rise of “tracking polls” fed the seemingly insatiable appetite of the media for “horse race” coverage. But possibly shoddy methods and careless reporting misrepresented the dynamics of the end game of the campaign. The few problematic incidents reconfirm the need for full disclosure of survey methods and analysis techniques, as well as the need to make data available for secondary analysis by a wide range of survey methodologists in order to understand what happened and how to improve future work.

The New Hampshire Exit Poll

Exit polls have a special place in the coverage of American elections because they provide, in principle, for an independent assessment of why voters supported particular candidates—free from the spin that managers and candidates alike place on the “meaning” of an election.

When the networks consolidated their operations for 1990 under the umbrella of Voter Research and Surveys (VRS), there were immediate and significant cost sav-

ings for all of them. But the construction of a single questionnaire with the results combined into a single dataset meant that all analysis would flow from a single source. If the resulting data were valid, that presented no problem of interpretation. But a significant difference between the exit poll estimate of the outcome and the actual vote totals could produce problems of either estimation or analysis, without—for most analysts on election night—an independent data source for verification.

In the 1992 New Hampshire primary, first in line and with particular significance in our “front loaded” nomination system, the VRS data greatly overestimated the support for Patrick Buchanan. The consequence was to color the editorial content of the early evening coverage and to suggest that President Bush was in much more trouble than expected (or than in fact he turned out to be). The exit poll data suggested a narrow Bush victory, while the vote total eventually showed him getting a substantial 16 point margin.

The problem was not the projected winner, but the newsworthiness of the (slight) margin. Given the methodology of exit polls and the early availability of the data, the editorial commentary began with the evening news broadcasts and continued on into the segments when the race was called just after the polls closed. Many Americans went to bed that night thinking the president had been badly damaged. And for most reporters and editors there was no second source of information, until all of the votes were counted, to counteract this editorial tone.

Warren J. Mitofsky, director of VRS, has described what happened with the

VRS data on that day, and speculated on the source of the estimation error.¹ There has been no public review of the exit poll methodology in New Hampshire or elsewhere, and such a review is badly needed. The problem may have been as simple as a bad sample, but the fact the same error was shared by three other exit polls suggests it may have been more methodologically complicated. In any case there is a public as well as corporate interest in understanding and explaining what went wrong.

Reporting on the Character Issue

The tendency of media pollsters to report the marginals for individual questions and rarely cross-tabulate results beyond demographic characteristics of respondents is well known. There are other ways that election survey data can and should be reported more meaningfully. A potent example occurred in the surveys conducted after the allegations by Gennifer Flowers that she had had an affair with Bill Clinton. The basic reporting suggested that relatively large segments of the electorate had concerns about a candidate’s marital fidelity and the Clinton-Flowers case in particular.

But extended analysis of one survey conducted by ABC News and the Washington Post suggested that respondents’ predispositions toward the candidates affected their attitudes on the importance of the fidelity issue.² Those who supported Bush over Clinton at that time, irrespective of party, were more likely to be concerned about the issue than those who had already decided to support Clinton. This analysis suggested an alternative, equally important story that could have been de-

veloped from the survey data. By reporting a relationship rather than the marginal distributions of single questions, readers and viewers would have been better informed as to the political significance of the event.

The Tracking Polls

The most disconcerting element of polling in the 1992 campaign was the advent of "tracking" polls by several news organizations. This insidious development played upon all of the worst tendencies of journalists to focus almost entirely upon who is ahead and by how much. The coverage at the end of the campaign was complicated by faulty polling and faulty reporting. Both of these developments should be nipped in the bud. It's not sufficient to evaluate pre-election polls on the basis of their "average" estimate of the outcome, as was commonly done in the last few days before the election. Each poll must be evaluated on its own methodological merits, errors identified, and corrective measures taken the next time.

Tracking polls were introduced as a device through which candidates could assess campaign strategy and developments on a very short-term horizon. They involve relatively small samples of interviews conducted every 24 hours, that are usually combined in some kind of moving average to boost sample size and hence statistical reliability. One-day surveys present substantial problems of nonsampling error. In order to complete enough interviews, sampling is conducted with limited or no call backs. Such samples may be highly skewed because certain groups may be away from home at the time the calls are made much more than are other groups.³

At the end of the campaign, ABC News, the Tarrance Organization in an enterprise known as Battleground '92, and the Gallup Organization separately conducted tracking polls. The Gallup effort for CNN/USA Today was reported

as showing a more substantial tightening of the race in the last two weeks and received considerably more coverage. There were two problems with this conclusion: the survey data were most likely faulty, and the reporting was certainly faulty. The problem with the survey data was that two different interviewing periods were used—during the week (from 5 to 9 p.m.), and on the weekend (all day long).⁴ Generally, one call was made to a house per day, unless there was a busy signal. Numbers where there was no contact were moved to the next day's sample. Gallup selected respondents using a "youngest male/oldest female at

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home" criterion. This produces something akin to an availability sample of people at home during those hours. One consequence of this methodology was to increase the likelihood that midweek interviews would produce candidate preference distributions that would favor Bush more than would weekend interviews. This raises the prospect that a methodological artifact would suggest that the presidential race was tightening and then opening up again just before election day.

This problem was complicated by two important shifts in analysis. The first involved a move from "registered" to "likely" voters as the base, and the second was a change in the way that Gallup allocated the "undecided" voters in its final estimate. The shift in the analytical base is common to most surveys as election day nears. In national elections it always produces a more Republican estimate of the outcome because of the greater propensity of Republicans to vote and hence to appear as "likely voters."⁵ But these findings this year were not consis-

tently reported as "what would have been expected" by the shift in reference samples. One problem was that CNN and USA Today persisted in displaying the survey time series continuously, instead of separating the data from "registered" and "likely" voters into two time series. As a result, the "narrowing" of the race, an inherently more newsworthy story, was exaggerated.

Since 1988, Gallup has based its final pre-election estimate of the outcome of the election on telephone interviews, rather than face-to-face interviews employing a secret ballot. In 1992, Gallup also revised its method for allocating the "undecided" respondents in its final estimate of the election outcome. Their review of past results suggested that the survey estimated the incumbent's proportion of the actual vote quite well, but underestimated the challenger's. So they allocated virtually all of the "undecided" respondents in their final survey to the Clinton total, producing an estimate of a 12 percentage point margin for Clinton over Bush. Clinton was in fact to win by 5.5 points.

Why are these matters important? Because they contribute to a developing folklore about the 1992 campaign. Was George Bush catching up, with momentum on his side, only to be derailed by the release of material from a new indictment of Casper Weinberger, just four days before the election? Or was the Clinton margin steady throughout the last 10 days of the campaign, with no effect from the indictment? Such a post-hoc search for meaning is inherently difficult and unsatisfactory because only certain plausible alternative methodological hypotheses can be tested. Nevertheless, it should be attempted in this instance.

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It should address a number of questions. Was there a shift in candidate support at the end of the campaign independent of survey timing and methodology? Information on date and circumstances of interviews could be used to address these questions. Was there a shift in candidate support independent of the reference sample analyzed—registered or likely voters? Does a content analysis indicate that the survey results could have been reported with greater care to minimize confusion in their interpretation? The important issue is maintaining public confidence in survey research.

Endnotes

¹Warren J. Mitofsky, "What Went Wrong With Exit Polling in New Hampshire?," *The Public Perspective*, March/April 1992, p. 17.

²Michael Traugott and Jennifer Means, "Problems of Character: Was it the Candidate or the Press?," *The Polling Report*, September 7, 1992.

³Michael W. Traugott "The Importance of Persistence in Respondent Selection for Preelection Surveys," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1987, pp. 48-57.

⁴"Polls Apart," *Newsweek*, November 9, 1992, p. 6.

⁵Michael W. Traugott and Clyde Tucker, "Strategies for Predicting Whether a Citizen Will Vote and Estimation of Electoral Outcomes," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1984, pp. 330-343. Although the delineation of "likely voters" is an area where the art of polling comes into play, research shows that there is little difference in the estimate produced by two commonly used methods to define the likely electorate—partitioning the data and discarding information from those deemed unlikely to vote, and using probability weighting for all respondents.

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