A VIEW FROM BRITAIN:
YOU CAN DO BETTER

By Robert M. Worcester

The American election is now over, and those "nutty pollsters" didn't do so badly after all. Six polling organizations put their necks on the line on the eve of the American presidential election, and five did OK. Harris and ABC tied for honors, with an average error on each candidate's share of the popular vote of 1.3% and an error on the gap of 2%. Very good. CBS and NBC were next, with an average share error of 2% and an error on the gap of 3%. Not bad. The Washington Post's poll was next to bottom, with a share error of 2% also, but a gap error of 4%, and Gallup, for CNN and USA Today, took the wooden paddle, never mind spoon, with a share error of 3% and a massive gap error of 7 points. Their final forecast (see Table 1)—in which they allocated undecideds to the Clinton total—was six points too high on Clinton and five too low on Perot. A six-poll "poll of polls," unweighted for sample size, overestimated Clinton by three, underestimated Perot by three, but got Bush right on.

If all that was at work was sampling error, the polls could be proud of themselves. I contend that sampling error is overdone. It ignores other probabilities for a start. If the 95% margin (a 19:1 bet) is ± 3% on a sample of 1,000, there should roughly be a two to one chance that the finding would be around ± 1.5%, and an even chance that it would be under ± 1%.

But by no means is sampling error the be all and the end all. These polls all missed out on the people who had changed their minds in the last twenty-four hours

of the election campaign. (Exit polls in Britain last April found 12% who said they switched in that final day after the last interviews were done.) And they were all done by phone, and not everybody has a phone. They missed out on everybody who'd voted absentee and then went off on vacation. They also missed me and the other overseas Americans who cast their ballots from abroad. And what about the refusals—estimated at as many

TABLE 1
THE OPINION POLLS IN THE 1992 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REPORTED	Harris	ABC	CBS	NBC	Gallup	WP		
	%	%	%	%	%	%		
Clinton	44	44	45	44	49	43		
Bush	38	37	37	36	37	35		
Perot	17	16	15	15	14	16	Poll of	Election
Total	99	97	97	95	100	94	Polls	Result
REALLOCATED	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Clinton	45	45	46	46	49	46	46	43
Bush	38	38	38	38	37	37	38	38
Perot	17	17	16	16	14	17	16	19
Clinton Lead	7	7	8	8	12	9	8	5
Error on Share	1.33	1.33	2.00	2.00	4.00	2.00	2.00	
Error on Gap	2.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	7.00	4.00	3.00	

as one in two attempted? In other words, it's a miracle the polls did as well as they did, and a bit unfair they get so little credit for getting it so right, and a whole lot of grief when they get it wrong.

Bad Reporting of Good Data

In some ways pollsters in America are their own worst enemies. They ask for a punch on the nose by the way they report their results. Every week since early September, I've been fed the latest poll results, fieldwork dates, sample sizes, and universe samples by Jennifer Baggette of AEI's American Enterprise Magazine; and then have written an analysis of the American election for The (London) Times.

In America, they keep changing the universe they are reporting on. It's tough trying to compare polls of all adults, registered voters, and likely voters. Most

pundits don't even try; they just report them as they see them, and then criticize the polls for their inconsistency. I didn't just report the raw figures as other British newspapers, radio and television did, and as did the American news media I saw such as CNN, ABC (via satellite), USA Today and the International Herald Tribune, but reallocated them so they could be compared on the same base, and to the result of the 1988 contest. After all, by definition, "don't knows" didn't vote in 1988, when Bush beat Dukakis by 54% to 46%.

One American commentator reported last summer that "the polls are all over the place": Yankelovich Clancy Shulman had Clinton at 53% and Harris had him at 63%, ten points adrift. But the 53% Clinton finding from Yankelovich Clancy Shulman showed 22% and the 63% from Harris showed 4% "don't knows." Reallocate the "don't knows," and the two polls were within a point of each other.

I am astonished sometimes by how thin the samples in American polls are, sometimes as few as 800 in nationwide polls and as low as 400 in state contests. In Britain, the major pollsters don't accept voting-intention poll assignments when fewer than 1,000 interviews are taken. Twice as many interviews isn't twice as good, but it's roughly half again better.

And for eight weeks Gallup reported on "registered voters," the ninth week on "likely voters," and finally reallocated the "don't knows" (and their client, USA Today, didn't explain how). It couldn't have

been straight arithmetic proportion, for the reallocated Perot share was the same, an impossibility on a straight proportional weighting. No wonder people were confused!

The Americans always seemed to focus on the gap between Bush and Clinton, a holdover from the days of two-candidate presidential races. As we know in Great Britain, the error on the gap is double that of the share, and gap movements accentuate both volatility and interplay between the candidates in a three-way race. Bush could have held his share, yet if Perot dragged support from Clinton, and the effect was to narrow the Clinton-Bush gap, it only tells a partial and sometimes misleading story.

Americans Should Pay More Attention to "Swings"

In America, poll reporters typically don't use the concept we in Britain do of "swing," where you take the change of share of each major candidate since the last time (last election, a month ago, last week or whatever), net them out and divide by two. This gives you the number of people out of 100 who've "swung" from one side to the other. In its analysis of the data from the Voter Research and Surveys exit poll of 15,214 voters, USA Today led into their excellent graphics by saying that "the three-way presidential race makes direct comparisons difficult..." The Economist had no such difficulty, and included a most interesting table of state-by-state comparisons showing that in this election the "swing" from Bush to Clinton was 6.5%. (The swing in Arkansas was 17% in support of its native son, but only 4% in Texas where Clinton needed a 6% swing to take the state: He needed an 11% swing to take Nevada, and just got it.) There were 31 states where the vote was within 2.5% of the average national swing in this election. (See Table 2.)

The greatest swizz for the media is to get their pollster to take a few (e.g., 300-500) interviews nightly, and average them over two or three days in order to publish a "new" poll every day, and only pay for one every couple of days. This ensures that secondary reports of the "latest" poll have your paper's name up in lights every night, but also ensures that the figures are out of date, having on average been done two days earlier. When the Gallup rolling poll for CNN dropped from a 11% Clinton lead Monday to 2% on Wednesday, it meant that the double sample done on the Tuesday night had to have shown a Bush lead of about four. I doubt that Bush ever really had that kind of lead on the ground: I predicted that when the "rogue" result washed out of their averages on the weekend, Clinton's lead would show a big jump. It did, to 8%, but that "Wobbly Thursday" surely must have thrown the Clinton poll watchers into a tizzy!

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TABLE 2
THE SWING TO THE DEMOCRATS 1988 TO 1992

States	Swing needed for the Democrats to win state that Republicans won in 1988	Swing achieved, 1988 to 1992
Arkansas	8%	17%
New Hampshire	13	14
Maine	6	12
California	2	11
Delaware	6	11
Nevada	11	11
Tennessee	9	11
Vermont	2	11
Arizona	11	10
Florida	11	10
Georgia	10	10
Illinois	1	9
Louisiana	6	9
Maryland	2	9
Michigan	4	9
Kentucky	6	8
Massachusetts	0	8
Missouri	2	8
New Jersey	7	8
New Mexico	3	8
Colorado	4	7
Connecticut	3	7
Indiana	10	7
New York	0	7
North Carolina	8	7
Ohio	6	7
Pennsylvania	1	7
South Carolina	12	7
Virginia	10	7
Washington	0	7
Wyoming	11	7
Alabama	10	6
Alaska	12	6
Mississippi	11	6
Rhode Island	0	6
West Virginia	0	6
Montana	3	5
Oregon	0	5
District of Columbia	0	5
Kansas	7	4
Minnesota	0	4
Texas	6	4
Idaho	13	3
Utah	17	3
Hawaii	0	2
Oklahoma	8	2
South Dakota	3	1
Wisconsin	0	1
Nebraska	11	0
Iowa	0	-1
North Dakota	3	-1

Note: "Zero" means the Democrats won the state in 1988.
Source: *The Economist,* November 7, 1992, p. 29.