

EXIT POLLING IN RUSSIA— WELCOME TO DEMOCRACY

By Warren J. Mitofsky

In principle, you can do an exit poll in Russia. "In principle," was the operative phrase Vladimir Andreenkov used to qualify almost every reply to our methodological requests. Whatever we asked could be done, he said, "in principle."

Background

Murray Edelman and I went to Moscow to conduct Russia's first exit poll for the April 25, 1993 referendum. This was Russia's second national vote since the collapse of Communism in August 1991. It was to be a rigged test of Boris Yeltsin's popularity, rigged by the loyal opposition in the Congress of People's Deputies. It wrote the referendum questions, set the ground rules, and picked the date.

The four questions the Congress wrote asked for a vote of confidence on Yeltsin's presidency; approval of his economic and political reforms; and whether there should be presidential and congressional elections before each of their terms expired. The Congress put up a road block to the passage of any of these referendum items. It required for passage absolute majorities of all people registered. A simple majority of the voters would be inadequate. This meant that about 80% of those going to the polls would have to vote "yes" for a question to pass, assuming turnout was at about the same 65% level as in the election that made Boris Yeltsin president.

The Constitutional Court eventually overruled the Congress. For the first two questions to pass, the Court held, only a simple majority of those voting would be needed. Early elections for president or congress would still require absolute majorities.

There was great interest in the referendum by the large industrial nations of the world. At the Economic Summit in Tokyo two weeks before the referendum, the G-7 countries had agreed to pump up Russia's economy and Yeltsin's presidency by committing \$28 billion to Russia. This was Bill Clinton's first decisive foreign policy venture. He risked his deteriorating political capital on Boris Yeltsin's popularity in Russia. Voter Research & Surveys (VRS) sponsored a Russian exit poll as part of its members' coverage of this election. Eight news organizations shared the cost. The United States participants were CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and the *Washington Post*. ZDF in Germany, and Fuji and Tokyo Broadcasting System in Japan, also joined in.

Our first problem was finding a Russian survey organization we could work with. Before we went to Russia we faxed letters to a number of firms describing our project and asking for bids and descriptions of their capabilities. Prices varied over a very wide range and seemed to have little to do with the actual cost of the services they provided. Bids seemed more geared to what it was thought Americans would pay. Even the low bids were probably enough to generate a substantial profit.

Key to us was the sample design these firms used for their other surveys. We hoped to find an area-probability design that we could adapt to our needs. We also wanted to use their field staff to conduct the polling place interviews. Several years ago CBS News and the *New York Times* tried to find a Soviet survey firm to conduct a public opinion poll of the country. At that time we finally decided not to do a poll in Russia, because none of the designs presented to us were very good.

We eliminated several firms from the competition based on their response to our letter. We talked with three: the Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research, the "Public Opinion" Foundation, and the Institute for Comparative Social Research, Ltd. (CESSI). We selected CESSI based on the description of its sample design, and our expectation that we could work well with its director, Vladimir Andreenkov.

Our other two finalists thought an exit poll was such a good idea they found other sponsors to underwrite them. The "Public Opinion" Foundation sampled 16 cities in its exit poll for NHK television in Japan. The Russian Center polled for the *Associated Press* and reported some results from its exit poll on election day from Siberia and The Far East. They were very generous to me after the election, describing their methods and coverage, but they wouldn't give me their final results 48 hours after the balloting. They said the findings still were not ready to be released.

The Sample Design

From its western border in Europe to its eastern border in the Bering straits, Russia spreads over 11 time zones. Almost half of its population is in the western-most time zone, which includes Moscow and St. Petersburg. Much of the country's populace live in small towns and rural areas. Designing a sample to cover this vast country is a challenge.

The sample put together by Vladimir used 50 strata. Moscow and St. Petersburg were each self-representing strata. The other 48 were defined within regions of the country by clusters of *raions*. A *raion* is the equivalent of a *county* in the United States. One or more raions were

grouped together to form a cluster. There were many clusters in each stratum, each about the same size. One raion was selected within each stratum for our sample. Within a raion two voting places were selected. With a modest oversample in Moscow and St. Petersburg we ended up with a sample of 110 voting places.

There were compromises between the design Vladimir described to us and what we actually did. We thought the selection would be probability proportionate to size. It wasn't. The raion clusters were selected with equal probability. We thought we could stratify voting places within raions by the vote in the 1991 presidential election and then sample proportionate to the number of voters. We couldn't. Vote data from the presidential election were not saved in many places. We were told we could buy the data from an institute or an official if we would pay \$1,000 in US currency, but again we struck out. No one in Russia seems to have saved the 1991 presidential vote below the level of the *oblast*. The latter is roughly the equivalent of a state in the United States.

We wanted to select voting places proportionate to current voter registration, but that information wasn't attainable in some places until the day before the referendum. As a back-up we were prepared to select voting places with equal probability, but we still needed the total number in the raion. This information was so late in coming that we were still building data files on election morning.

The Questionnaire

We put together the questionnaire much the same way as we have done many times for US elections. We completed the first draft in New York before we left. The next draft was done after consulting with the Moscow bureaus of the participants. A conference call with the VRS survey committee, which took 2 hours and 15 minutes, produced a third draft. We shouted into a speaker phone, which transmitted the conversation via satellite. Speaking over a satellite is not like an ordinary phone line: Only one

person can talk at a time, which was a new ground rule for these meetings. If both sides talk, the line goes dead and no one hears.

First we got Nina, Vladimir's wife, to translate it. She got hung up on translating the word 'Communist.' We had intended to ask what political form of government the people of Russia preferred, communism or democracy. She said it was 'socialist,' or 'totalitarian,' but she wouldn't call it communist.

We were told that the Moscow bureau chiefs who gave us their thoughts did not have the right insights. "They are elitists," we were told by a network pollster who certainly had his finger on the Russian pulse from his office in the states. No elitist, he! Our VRS experience has taught us that "questionnaire by committee" is usually better than the "questionnaire by solitary efforts" of the pre-VRS days—and the Russian exit poll effort was no exception. At last, after several more go-arounds, it looked like we had a questionnaire. It had 16 questions—the 4 referendum questions on the ballot, 6 opinion questions and 6 factual questions about the voter's background. In addition, we had the region and an urban/rural code for each respondent.

The last task was to get it translated into Russian and then translated by someone else back into English. You then hope the last translation agrees with the original English version. If not, you start translating again. First we got Nina, Vladimir's wife, to translate it. She got hung up on translating the word "Communist." We had intended to ask what political form of government the people of Russia preferred, communism or democracy. She said it was "socialist," or "totalitarian," but she wouldn't call it communist. She finally wrote in Russian, "Socialism, as in the time of Brezhnev." We got a better Russian phrase instead of

communism from Jonathan Sanders at the CBS bureau: "Soviet power."

Our last problem was getting the exact Russian version of the four referendum questions. All we had was the *New York Times* translation into English, which Nina translated back into Russian. All this translating seemed rather unfortunate for questions that originated in Russian, but no one seemed to be able to locate the official Russian version. We wanted the exit poll to be the same as the ballot voters would see when they cast their ballots.

Interviewing and Data Collection

We had brought training materials and forms for recording information at the voting place and for the telephone operators to use when interviewers called the office with their results. All these materials had to be adapted to fit the circumstances. For these materials, Vladimir was our translator, a task he didn't seem to relish. I assured him that he would be the only pollster in Russia that would know how to conduct an exit poll—after he finished translating, that is.

Vladimir hired two interviewers for each voting place and one manager to supervise two voting places. We also used several of the managers who lived near Moscow to test the translated training materials. Murray sat through a training session and discovered a few problems. One had to do with the explanation about which voters leaving the polling place were to be included in the sample. We talk about interviewing every *n*th voter in the instructions. In our training example, 'n' was '2'. The Russian interviewers thought that meant you skip two people and interview the next person. We meant every second person was to be interviewed.

About 11 days before the referendum we were finally ready to ship materials. In Russia the regular mail is entirely unreliable. Vladimir said our polling forms would not arrive this year if we used the mail. He shipped the materials, using couriers on trains.

Our next task was to train and organize people to work in the office processing the information. All the phone calls could not come into Vladimir's office; he had only three telephones, including a FAX machine. We found several other phones and a FAX in the building. The majority of the phones we used were in

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the homes of people who lived nearby. Managers and interviewers were given two phone numbers—the first in Vladimir's office, and the second in one of the nearby homes. A hand tally of the answers to the first ten questions was done in the field by an interviewer. That tally came directly to the office. The raw results, as the interviewer read each answer to each question, came to the neighboring homes or were faxed to the office.

The many time zones worked in our favor. The eastern frontier is seven hours ahead of Moscow. We planned to take the first call at mid-day local time. This meant that half the sample of voting districts would have called in and been loaded into the computer before the half in the western (Moscow) time zone reported their results.

The telephone system was a big uncertainty. The Russian phone system was on a par with the one in the Philippines. For projections there, we set up a ham radio network to collect the vote. The most reliable way to fax results from one news bureau in Moscow to another is to send it via satellite first to the US and from there have someone fax it back to the other Moscow location. It is not possible to send a fax in Moscow without a follow-

up phone call to correct the unreadable lines. On election night, results were distributed within Moscow via courier, and not by fax. With all the uncertainty about phones we still were able to receive many exit poll results via fax from around the country. Interviewers called in after each fax to report results that were lost in transmission.

When the election was 11 days away, Vladimir began to show that he wasn't as calm inside as he appeared on the surface. That was the first sure sign he had caught on to the magnitude of the logistics. Doing an exit poll that sampled all of Russia was much more complicated than he expected. He made it clear—Murray and I had to keep track of all the details. He was scared to death. We had nothing to lose if it went poorly, he said. We could just blame it on the crazy Russian system where nothing works. He, on the other hand, could lose his reputation. Maybe he was a household name in Russia, the George Gallup of Vladivostok, Siberia, and the Ural Mountains. He must have been catching on if fear had shaken him this much.

Election Day

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In a stroke of genius, Murray suggested we bring someone who could speak both Russian and English. If we had a problem we needed someone else who could translate. Otherwise, we would have to deal through Vladimir, and he was going to be fully occupied controlling the field work and data processing. We brought in Steve Rosenberg, a young desk assistant at CBS. He came with the understanding that he had to be back at the CBS bureau by 6:00. And he was—6:00 the next morning. Welcome to election night, Steve!

The office part of the operation got organized after a while. It actually worked quite smoothly—our first surprise of the day. Our second was the smooth flow of results from around the country. Interviewers called in their hand tally of the first 10 questions on time and without incident.

We used an election estimating model that we first used for the Philippine election between Marcos and Aquino in 1986. Its main virtue was it ran in a PC. We had to make major changes in it for the Russian referendum. Our usual quality control calculations would not work in the absence of past election returns.

Our first release was scheduled for 5 pm in Moscow (9 am in New York) and three hours before the polls closed in that time zone. It was just an early hint about the results of the referendum questions. No numbers were reported. This was fairly easy. The early results showed Yeltsin getting everything he wanted. The

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timing was scheduled to coincide with the taping of "Meet the Press." Tim Russert of NBC was our first supporter, and he got to make the first broadcast. Hinting at the outcome before the polls closed was something the networks had stopped doing in 1985 in the United States. There was concern that the Russian Tim Worth or David Broder would object to broadcasting early results from the Far East that might affect the vote in the west (that is, Moscow and St. Petersburg). Actually, the results were not broadcast in Russia, except by CNN. There were no complaints.

We distributed two releases before the networks' early Sunday evening news

broadcasts. These came well after the last polls closed in Moscow. After 5:00 in New York participants could report the results of the four referendum questions and the six opinion questions. These were just marginal results based on the hand tallies. The detailed cross tabs from the exit poll were promised for the networks' broadcasts the next morning. The individual responses of almost 9,000 voters were collected from 101 of the 110 voting places in our sample. The refusal rate was 16%, which is half what we experience in US elections.

There were various reasons why we didn't get results from nine voting places. A bridge was washed out, phones were not working, and one interviewer got arrested. (That was in Moscow, where the local soviet complained to the police. The interviewer was soon released, but the police took all the materials.) The data were keyed in Moscow and transmitted to New York via CompuServe's satellite. There, a time-consuming weighting run took place and tables were prepared. They were faxed to all participating news organizations around the world and also back to Moscow for distribution locally.

The Results

Voters wanted Boris Yeltsin to be their president and they wanted his eco-

nomic reforms to continue, even though the country had a 2,600% rate of inflation in 1992. They did not want to turn the clock back to the days before Perestroika, even though many of them had better living conditions then. Yeltsin got his vote of confidence, but the vote calling for early elections for president and the Congress of People's Deputies was defeated. The requirement of an absolute majority was responsible for this result. Had the decision been determined by just a majority of those voting, early elections would have been called. The big loser was the Congress. Almost no one had confidence in it.

Regardless of how long voters expected improvement to take, all who thought the economy would eventually improve gave the president a strong vote of confidence. Those economic pessimists who thought the economy would never improve, given the course charted, voted strongly against Yeltsin.

Voters said clearly that they did not want to go back to a Soviet socialist regime. They wanted democracy or some other form of government. Interestingly, it's the young who want "some other form of government" most, more than they want democracy. No matter where in the country voters lived or who they were, no group gave even a plurality of its support to Soviet Socialism.

In our earlier drafts we considered adding a choice for another type of government. It contained the Russian word for a "strong man," someone who would single-handedly lead the nation. Here was a case where the local experts were probably right. We should have offered that as a choice. My sense is that it might have been very popular.

Conclusion

Much more analysis is possible from the data. I've only presented the highlights here. Conducting the poll was a compelling and an exhausting experience. We learned to adapt our techniques and still produce reasonable results. We had just three weeks in Moscow to prepare; two more weeks would have been ideal.

It was not the best exit poll we ever did. The early results were off by four or five points. It was the best we could have done under the circumstances. If there is a next time, we can do better. We asked Vladimir to collect and store voting-district-level returns from the referendum before they are lost by local officials so we can be prepared for coverage of the next Russian election. After all, VRS does this in Alabama. That state doesn't save its precinct level vote returns either.

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