

# Expecting the Unexpected

## The Problem of Undecided Voters

By Tom S. Gruca

In the 1993 New Jersey governor's race, incumbent Democrat Jim Florio led his Republican challenger Christine Todd Whitman in four of five pre-election polls. His lead was 15 points (49%/34%) in *The New York Times*/WCBS poll (October 16-18), 10 points (51%/41%) in a *Bergen Record* poll (October 24-27), 9 points (48%/39%) in the *Newark Star-Ledger* poll (October 27-30), and 7 points (46%/39%) in the *Burlington County Times*/KYW (October 25-27) poll. Only the *Asbury Park Press* (October 28-30) showed a dead heat at 38% each, suggesting anything but a clear win for the sitting governor. However, to the surprise of many seasoned political analysts, Mrs. Whitman narrowly won the contest by a 49 to 48% margin.

In their postmortem, *The New York Times* offered a number of alternative explanations for why the polls were "wrong." These included a last-second media blitz, the volatility of the electorate, and the impact of the polls themselves on the turnout of Florio supporters. While the experts interviewed by the *Times* offered plausible suggestions for why there was such a discrepancy between the polls and the final results, they missed one obvious explanation. While the polls were not wrong, perhaps the coverage of them was erroneous.

In particular, by characterizing the race in terms of point spreads, political reporters made an implicit assumption that the undecided voters would split evenly between the candidates. In four of five cases, such a split would suggest that Florio would win. However, previous polling experience shows that an even split of respondents who reply "don't know" or "unsure" in a pre-election survey is unlikely. In fact, in the majority of cases, most of the undecided vote goes to the challenger!

### The Incumbent Rule

In the late 1980s, Nick Panagakis of Market Shares Corporation identified this important pattern in the disposition of undecided voters in incumbent re-election campaigns. In his analysis of 155 pre-election polls from state and local races, he

found that in 127 cases (82%), the majority of the undecided vote appeared to go to the challenger. He labeled this pattern, "The Incumbent Rule" (*Polling Report*, February 27, 1989).

The theory behind the Incumbent Rule is that in re-election situations, the undecided voters are not truly undecided between candidates, they are undecided about the incumbent and whether or not he/she deserves a second term. Pre-election polls take place only weeks (or days) before an election. By this time, an incumbent's record

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and reputation are well-known. In other words, whatever in-office advantages he/she has, such as name recognition and publicized achievements, are already on the table. Yet, even with these advantages played out, undecided voters are *still* questioning whether or not to grant the incumbent a second term. Consequently, most undecided voters end up voting for the challenger. There are, of course, some exceptions to the Incumbent Rule. Many such cases would include short-term incumbents who have not built up a sufficient track record (no initial advantage) or well-known challengers who have held comparable office, thereby acquiring their own history of achievement.

Based on his analysis, Panagakis proposed the following guidelines for interpreting the undecided vote in pre-election polls:

1. The race should not be characterized by the point spread. Any lead by the incumbent usually is smaller than it appears, since most of the undecided vote goes to the challenger.

2. An incumbent leading with less than 50% (versus one challenger) often ends up losing the election.

3. Due to the misinterpretation of the undecided vote, many polls thought to be wrong were, upon further analysis, actually right.

Clearly, these guidelines would have been useful in the New Jersey race. In fact, there would have been no need to discuss "problems" with the polls since readers would have been prepared for eventual results.

Since the guidelines suggested by the Incumbent Rule are a departure from the usual method of reporting polls, we attempted to validate the results obtained by Panagakis. We analyzed a separate sample of 138 final pre-election media polls from 1990 and 1992 gubernatorial, US Senate and US House races.

### Results

Our findings support the Incumbent Rule. Of the 138 races, the majority of the undecided voted for the challenger in 67% of the cases. While this is less than the 82% in Panagakis' original research, it remains well above the null hypothesis of 50%. This difference may be due to the composition of the samples. Recall that in the Panagakis data, there were a number of state (e.g. attorney general), county and city-level races. Such races are less salient to voters, perhaps leading to wider shifts to the challenger.

There is quite a difference between the accuracy of poll projections of an incumbent's vote total and that of the challenger. In a majority of the cases (71 out of 138), the poll projections for the incumbent were within plus or minus four points of the actual vote totals. In contrast, of the 93 challengers who received a majority of the undecided vote, 58 (62%) gained 10 points or more between the poll and election day

(both of these results are comparable to the Panagakis study).

In our sample, there are 33 pre-election surveys in which the incumbent is leading, but with less than 50% of the "vote". In 12 of those cases (36%), the incumbent ends up losing the election. The average pre-election point spread for losing incumbents was 6%, compared to 10% for successful incumbents.

There were 18 races which featured short-term incumbents, rematches or incumbent-like challengers who held higher or comparable office. For example, the offices of governor and senator were considered

equivalent. House seats were considered equivalent to statewide office only if the state had two or fewer representatives in Congress. Using his definition of incumbent-like challengers, Panagakis was able to account for 60% of the exceptions to the Incumbent Rule.

In our sample, the races which fell into the above category were split evenly between those in which the majority of undecided went for the challenger and those where the majority went for the incumbent. They accounted for 22.5% of the races in which the majority of the undecided went for the incumbent versus 9% of the cases where the majority of the undecided went

for the challenger.

Our analysis of pre-election polls from 1990 and 1992 confirms most of the results of the earlier study by Panagakis. The Incumbent Rule appears to be alive and well in the 1990s. So, to avoid surprises, users of polling results may wish to consider the guidelines suggested above.

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### 1990 & 1992 GUBERNATORIAL RACES

Year	Date of Poll	State	Incumbent	Challenger	Poll		Election		Point Spread	
					Inc.	Chal.	Inc.	Chal.	Poll	Election
<b>Majority of Undecided Vote For Challenger: 21 Polls</b>										
1992	10/4-7	IN	Bayh	Pearson	67%	28%	62%	37%	39	25
1990	10/26-28	MI	Blanchard	Engler	46	42	49	50	4	-1
1990	10/28	SC	Campbell	Mitchell	67	23	70	28	44	42
1990	10/4-7	PA	Casey	Hafer	68	21	68	32	47	36
1990	10/2	AR	Clinton	Nelson	57	33	58	43	24	15
1990	10/26-28	AR	Clinton	Nelson	52	32	58	43	20	15
1990	10/24	NY	Cuomo	Others	61	24	53	47	37	6
1990	10/27-28	KS	Hayden	Finney	43	38	43	49	5	-6
1990	10/28-30	AL	Hunt	Hubbert	49	44	52	48	5	4
1990	10/7-9	FL	Martinez	Chiles	40	42	44	57	-2	-13
1990	10/27-28	FL	Martinez	Chiles	45	46	44	57	-1	-13
1990	10/3-7	SD	Miekelson	Samuelson	58	26	59	41	32	18
1990	10/25-28	MN	Perpich	Carlson	45	42	46	50	3	-4
1990	11/4	MN	Perpich	Carlson	43	44	46	50	-1	-4
1990	10/23-25	CO	Romer	Andrews	66	20	62	35	46	27
1990	11/90	CO	Romer	Others	63	29	62	38	34	24
1990	10/22-25	MD	Schaefer	Shopard	59	30	60	40	29	20
1990	10/90	WY	Sullivan	Mead	61	26	65	35	35	30
1990	10/17-19	WI	Thompson	Loftus	57	25	58	42	32	16
1990	10/24-27	WI	Thompson	Loftus	58	31	58	42	27	16
1990	10/19-21	HI	Waihee	Hemmings	64	28	60	39	36	21
<b>Split: 1 Poll</b>										
1990	10/24-26	NE	Orr	Nelson	41%	42%	49%	50%	-1	-1
<b>Majority of Undecided Vote For Incumbent: 11 Polls</b>										
1990	10/14	IA	Branstad	Avenson	52%	33%	61%	39%	19	22
1990	10/27-30	IA	Branstad	Averson	53	36	61	39	17	22
1992	10/19-20	WV	Caperton	Others	49	42	56	44	7	12
1992	10/30	WV	Caperton	Others	43	40	56	44	3	12
1992	10/17-18	VT	Dean	McCloughry	67	22	75	23	45	52
1990	10/28-30	RI	Diprete	Sundlun	18	71	26	74	-53	-48
1990	10/24	NH	Gregg	Grandmaison	44	23	60	35	21	25
1990	10/90	AL	Hunt	Hubbert	47	45	52	48	2	4
1990	10/7-9	ME	McKernan	Brennan	39	46	47	44	-7	3
1990	8/14-15	NV	Miller	Gallaway	60	27	65	30	33	35
1992	10/21-22	RI	Sundlun	Leonard	56	30	62	34	26	28

**1992 SENATE RACES**

Year	Date of Poll	State	Incumbent	Challenger	Poll		Election		Point Spread	
					Inc.	Chal.	Inc.	Chal.	Poll	Election
<b>Majority of Undecided Vote For Challenger: 29 Polls</b>										
1992	10/26-27	MO	Bond	Rothman-Serot	51%	34%	52%	45%	17	7
1992	10/25-29	MO	Bond	Rothman-Serot	53	38	52	45	15	7
1992	10/26	MO	Bond	Rothman-Serot	48	34	52	45	14	7
1992	10/16-18	AR	Bumpers	Huckabee	59	31	60	40	28	20
1992	10/28-31	IN	Coats	Hogeett	58	36	57	41	22	16
1992	10/23-25	CT	Dodd	Johnson	56	30	59	38	26	21
1992	10/26	KS	Dole	Others	55	26	63	37	29	26
1992	10/23-24	KY	Ford	Williams	63	19	63	36	44	27
1992	10/23-24	GA	Fowler	Coverdell	51	35	49	48	16	1
1992	10/23-25	FL	Graham	Grant	66	22	65	35	44	30
1992	10/25-30	IA	Grassley	Jones	75	20	70	27	55	43
1992	10/22-23	SC	Hollings	Hartnett	49	34	50	47	15	3
1992	10/26-28	SC	Hollings	Hartnett	55	41	50	47	14	3
1992	10/19-22	SC	Hollings	Hartnett	37	33	50	47	4	3
1992	10/23-24	HI	Inouyo	Reed	60	18	57	27	42	30
1992	10/29-30	WI	Kasten	Feingold	47	44	46	53	3	-7
1992	10/21-25	WI	Kasten	Feingold	47	44	46	53	3	-7
1992	10/17-18	VT	Leahy	Douglas	60	29	54	43	31	11
1992	10/24-26	AZ	McCain	Others	51	34	56	42	17	14
1992	10/16-17	AK	Murkowski	Others	51	43	53	47	8	6
1992	10/21-23	OK	Nickles	Lewis	55	31	59	38	24	21
1992	10/22-25	OR	Packwood	AuCoin	50	43	52	47	7	5
1992	10/23-24	NV	Reid	Dahl	56	33	51	40	23	11
1992	10/26-27	NC	Sanford	Faircloth	45	37	46	50	8	-4
1992	10/25-28	NC	Sanford	Faircloth	44	38	46	50	6	-4
1992	10/27-28	CA	Seymour	Feinstein	37	50	38	54	-13	-16
1992	10/225-28	CA	Seymour	Feinstein	36	50	38	54	-14	-16
1992	10/24-25	AL	Shelby	Sellers	65	21	65	33	44	32
1992	10/24-27	PA	Spector	Yeakel	40	36	49	46	4	3
<b>Split: 2 Polls</b>										
1992	10/26-29	KS	Dole	O'Dell	63%	31%	63%	31%	32	32
1992	10/27-28	OH	Glenn	Dewine	49	40	51	42	9	9
<b>Majority of Undecided Vote For Incumbent: 12 Polls</b>										
1992	10/26-27	NY	D'Amato	Abrams	42%	44%	49%	48%	-2	1
1992	10/24-26	NY	D'Amato	Abrams	35	38	49	48	-3	1
1992	10/25-26	NY	D'Amato	Abrams	41	47	49	48	-6	1
1992	10/23-25	NY	D'Amato	Abrams	37	48	49	48	-11	1
1992	10/21-22	SD	Daschle	Haar	58	34	65	33	24	32
1992	10/16-25	OH	Glenn	Dewine	50	42	51	42	8	9
1992	10/26-31	OH	Glenn	Dewine	50	42	51	42	8	9
1992	10/23-24	WI	Kasten	Feingold	40	48	46	53	-8	-7
1992	10/22-23	MD	Mikulski	Keyas	60	29	71	29	31	42
1992	10/25-26	OR	Packwood	AuCoin	47	43	52	47	4	5
1992	10/22-26	OR	Packwood	AuCoin	40	38	52	47	2	5
1992	10/27-28	PA	Spector	Yeakel	44	45	49	46	-1	3

**Editor's Note:** 1990 & 1992 House and 1990 Senate Races were omitted due to limitations of space.