

Exit Polling on the Russian Elections

by Warren J. Mitofsky

It is the day after the July 3rd runoff election for the presidency of the Russian Federation. I have been away from home since June 4th. I want to hear English spoken and not Russian. I'm tired of being overcharged by a factor of 4 to 5 times what I would pay in the states for everything from breakfast to transportation. I look around and see Russians struggling for a month on what my hotel room costs for a night. It is not a good place to be. I want Yeltsin to live out his four-year term before I come back and do another exit poll here.

The experience was exhilarating, but frustrating. I am exhausted and so is everyone else who worked on reporting Russia's two presidential elections. The first round was not decisive. A runoff between the top two candidates was required: Boris Yeltsin, the market reformer, versus Gennady Zyuganov, supporter of a return to economic paternalism. Russians, in a free and fair election, albeit dominated by pro-Yeltsin media, chose to move forward.

By all measures we were very successful. We performed beyond my expectations for the largest audience ever offered the results of an exit poll. The United States networks and major newspapers subscribed to our exit poll, as did television networks in Russia (NTV), Germany (ZDF), Italy (RAI), Finland (YLE), Austria (ORF) and Japan (Fuji). CNN International's broadcast reached a world-wide audience.

There were many more news organizations that reported the results of the Mitofsky International/CESSI, Ltd. exit poll that were not subscribers. Organizations like Reuters and the Associated Press appropriated it off the air, usually from CNN, and reported the exit poll to thousands of their subscribing newspapers, radio and television stations and paid Internet subscribers.

There were two exit polls, one for the first-round election and one for the runoff. They took place in 118 polling places across nine of the country's eleven time zones. We had no sample in the time zone furthest east, the one practically touching Alaska that has more polar bears than people. Nor was there any sample in the small part of Russia that is west of the Baltics.

The Exit Poll Process

The sample was adapted from a design used by Vladimir

Andreenkov, director of the Institute for Comparative Social Research (CESSI.) We did Russia's first exit poll together in 1993. The sample was drawn using a two-stage probability selection, first of *raions*, which are akin to counties in the US, and then polling places within *raions*. This type of selection differs from the election sampling we do in the US. In the US we simultaneously stratify by geographic location and by partisan voting in a past election. In Russia we were only able to take advantage of geographic stratification.

Past election data is very hard to come by in Russia. It is available at the level of an *okrug*, which is much larger than a *raion*. The country is divided into 225 *okrugs*. Historical voting records are not always available at the polling place level. Some local officials absolutely refuse to make past voting information available and the election commission does not have it. I asked Vladimir why this was so. He explained that "in principle, the vote of each polling place must be made available." In practice, he said, officials destroyed information about how their local area voted so there could be no retaliation against unpopular support for candidates. Public money might not find its way to areas that did not support a particular candidate, he said. In the future, the election commission says it will keep it—in principle, that is.

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Even simple things were harder to do in Russia. Sending a fax or downloading e-mail is an aerobic sport. Dialing a local call three or four times before you connect is the norm. Sending a fax successfully on the first try is a miracle. Even so, we were able to collect all our exit poll responses from around the country by phone or fax.

About 100 people were interviewed at each sample polling site for each of the two exit polls. A few precincts were lost because local officials made it difficult to conduct the exit poll, even though such polls are legal. For the runoff, in Novosibirsk, a large city in Siberia, interviewers were taken into custody by the police for three hours. In Cheliabinsk they were refused permission to conduct the exit poll. Interviewing proceeded with few incidents elsewhere.

One of the great myths about polling in underdeveloped countries is that people will be uncooperative and that they will not tell the truth to an interviewer. That rumor was popular currency in the media during the weeks leading up to the first-round election. Nothing could be further from the truth. Respondents were selected at a systematic rate throughout the voting day. We counted refusals and people who should have been interviewed but were missed for one reason or another. The refusals and misses amounted to 18% for the first election and 20% for the second. These are rates we would be pleased to have for exit polls in the US.

Round One

Runoff

Russian Elections:	Total	Yeltsin	Zyuganov	Lebed	Yavlinsky	Zhirinovskiy	Total	Yeltsin	Zyuganov
Presidential Vote	--	35%	29%	14%	10%	7%	--	54%	41%
Gender:									
Male	47%	34	28	16	9	9	49%	54	41
Female	53	36	29	13	11	5	50	56	39
Age:									
18-29	19	46	15	11	13	10	18	71	23
30-44	34	36	22	17	11	8	33	57	36
45-59	29	28	35	15	10	6	29	48	47
60+	18	33	45	11	5	3	19	48	50
Issues most important to your vote:									
Government payment of pensions/salaries	35	31	37	11	8	7	Not asked		
Economy	25	45	20	8	18	3			
Ending the war in Chechnya	20	35	28	18	8	8			
Controlling crime	13	23	26	31	5	11			
When were you and your family better off?									
Under Socialism, before Perestroika	46	14	52	15	7	9	47	24	71
Now	27	67	5	9	11	4	29	93	6
Not much difference	25	40	14	19	13	6	22	70	21
Best government for Russian Federation:									
Socialism as it was before Perestroika	22	7	71	9	3	8	8	10	88
Socialism made more modern	Not a response category in Round One						25	11	85
Democracy in its present form	28	72	6	9	7	4	7	93	6
Democracy with many changes	Not a response category in Round One						51	79	15
Something else	47	27	23	20	15	8	6	48	36
Big industrial enterprises should be owned by:									
State	58	27	39	15	9	7	Not asked		
Private	12	62	6	10	11	5			
Workers	26	40	19	16	12	8			
Voted for in first round:									
Lebed	Not applicable						14	56	32
Yavlinsky							7	68	19
Zhirinovskiy							4	36	51

Note: Not all response categories shown.

Source: Surveys by Mitofsky International/CESSI Ltd., round one June 16, 1996 and runoff July 3, 1996.

For security, data processing took place in both Russia and the US. The data made its way by e-mail from where it was collected and keyed in the Moscow suburbs to me in downtown Moscow and to Computing and Survey Systems in the US. The same software processed the data in both locations.

Without past polling-place data available for the first-round election, we made stratified estimates based on the vote in the 1995 election for the Duma. That was the election in

which the KPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) took control of the Duma. In that election, Russians cast a vote for a party and another vote for a representative from a single-member district, much like our House of Representatives. (The difference is that half the 450 seats are awarded in proportion to the national party vote, for all parties getting 5% or more of the total vote.) The vote for the parties led by Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in 1995 correlated very well with the vote for Zyuganov. The Yeltsin vote correlated

Russia's Presidential Election

with the vote for Our Home is Russia and the Yabloko parties, both moderate, pro-reform, parties.

For the runoff, there was good news and bad. We were able to get the vote by polling place from the first round, but the election commission was not able to produce the vote for each of the 225 *okrugs* in the 16 days between the first and second election. They were able to produce the vote by *oblast*/administrative areas. An *oblast* is the equivalent of a state. There are 89 such units. Stratifying by *oblasts* was not nearly as effective for the runoff as *okrugs* were for the first round. We did, however, have a ratio estimate that proved quite good.

Reporting the Exit Poll

The objective for doing an exit poll was to get information to the various news organizations so they could report to their viewers and readers. The schedule of releases was designed to coincide with the various on-air schedules of the broadcasters. The US networks all had Sunday morning talk shows, the earliest at 9 am eastern daylight time. That was 5 pm in Moscow, five hours before the polls closed in that time zone. Russia has a law against reporting polls during the 48 hours before the election is over. Our Russian news organization, NTV, did not make use of this first release, but the others did in their home countries. There is no law against reporting the results of the Russian election before the polls close to people in the United States.

The first releases for both elections were designed to give an indication of how the election was unfolding. They were cautious reports that left room for the possibility that later voting could change the outcomes. For the first round we said:

"Partial results through mid-day from exit polling conducted all across Russia show Boris Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov in a close race for President. A runoff in July seems likely. Trailing the leaders are Alexander Lebed, Grigory Yavlinsky and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. None of the other candidates are close."

For the runoff the first release just said Yeltsin was leading. It did not characterize the size of the lead.

The second release for both polls was within the hour after the polling places closed in Moscow. It had a projection and marginals for the opinion questions. The third release was three hours after the polls closed. It updated the projection and showed the relationship between issues or demographics and the vote.

Analysis

Round One

When an incumbent president runs for a second term, the election, generally, is thought to be a referendum on the president. This election was no exception. Three years ago, at the time of the

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national referenda, Russians gave Boris Yeltsin a vote of confidence and they gave the Duma a vote of no confidence. Both had been elected during the waning days of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's support was not overwhelming, but it was enough to keep him in office. Thereafter, his popularity plummeted. As recently as early in 1996 it looked as though he were headed for certain defeat. Once he started to campaign for reelection his numbers started improving. They improved steadily until a week before the election. Then he lost a little ground to his Communist challenger, Gennady Zyuganov. On June 16th, he eked out a modest three-point victory. It was enough to send them into a runoff for the presidency.

For the June 16th vote, Yeltsin's constituents showed more concern about a free-market economy than they did about other issues such as crime or the failure of the government to meet its obligations to pay state-employed workers and pensioners. They claimed to be better off than they were under the type of socialism that existed before perestroika. And, they preferred democracy as it was being practiced in Russia to other forms of government, including what they had in the past.

Zyuganov supporters felt just the opposite. They wanted the economic security that they had in the past and were willing to give up today's democracy for old-style Soviet socialism. The contrast could not have been clearer.

Yeltsin did not lose any votes because of the war in Chechnya. The issue was supposed to cost him the election but it had no measurable effect. This was likely due to Yeltsin's peace initiative during the weeks before the election. A truce was declared and Russian troops were to be withdrawn from Chechnya starting on election day.

Yeltsin's supporters were younger than Zyuganov's. Many of them worked in their own business or in government or were in an occupation that required a college education. Zyuganov's voters included a larger share of farmers and those without a job, including retirees and blue-collar workers.

Yeltsin's constituents were more likely to come from urban areas. The larger the city, the greater his support. The more rural the area, the better Zyuganov did.

The Lebed Factor

It came as a surprise to many observers that former General Alexander Lebed finished third with 15% of the vote. His voters were more likely middle aged, many worked as policeman or were in the military, and they were not from Moscow or St. Petersburg. The issue they were most concerned about

Public Opinion Abroad

was crime. Both sides wanted Lebed's support for the runoff. Yeltsin's first-round victory was too slim for comfort, and Lebed's support was deemed crucial. By a margin of 44 to 34% Lebed voters told exit pollsters they would lean more toward supporting Yeltsin than Zyuganov in a runoff. Even though Lebed's outspoken opposition to the war in Chechnya cost him his job in the military, Yeltsin wanted him back, or more importantly, he wanted the vote of Lebed's first-round supporters.

The Runoff

Within a week of the first election, Lebed became Yeltsin's security chief. He proclaimed himself Yeltsin's successor and within days fired four of the leading hard-liners around Yeltsin. He also engaged in the rhetoric of nationalists like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who finished fifth in the first round. Among other things, Lebed condemned foreign religious influence in Russia from Mormons and Jews and sounded as if he were trying to attract Zhirinovskiy supporters to his, and Yeltsin's, side.

It is not clear in hindsight if all the trouble Yeltsin went through to attract Lebed's voters was necessary for the runoff. In the second election, Lebed's supporters voted 56% for Yeltsin to 32% for Zyuganov. This was clearly an improvement over what had been expected before Lebed's endorsement. Even so, Lebed did not do as well for Yeltsin as the fourth-place finisher from round one, Grigory Yavlinsky. Yavlinsky, too, had tried to make a deal with Yeltsin for his support, but they could not agree on terms. Yeltsin probably thought Yavlinsky's former supporters would not vote for Zyuganov, deal or no deal. He was right. They cast their votes in the runoff 68% for Yeltsin to only 19% for Zyuganov. Even though Yavlinsky had a smaller share of the vote in the first round than Lebed, his supporters gave Yeltsin slightly more total votes in the runoff than Yeltsin got from Lebed supporters.

The number-one issue for voters in

both elections was the economy. They blamed Russia's economic crisis more on the current reforms than on the policies of the former government. It seemed that Yeltsin voters were willing to endure the problem, while Zyuganov voters were not. The latter were more likely to believe the economy would get better with a socialist government. Yeltsin's voters were more divided. They believed the economy would get better under Yeltsin, but a sizable number believed it would stay the same.

These negative feelings about the economy affected the kind of government people believed would be best for Russia. A majority chose democracy, but not the kind they have now. They rejected democracy in its present form overwhelmingly. They wanted a new kind of democracy, whatever that means to them. Those who wanted socialism also rejected what they had in the past. Only 8% want to go back to the old Soviet-style socialism. A modern form of socialism would be acceptable to a fourth of the voters.

Conclusion

In the US we think of exit polls as a way to make projections and analyze elections. Television wants them so they can put on a coherent election-night broadcast. Newspapers need them so they can have a lead about who won for the morning edition after the election and so they can tell us the following day why a candidate won.

These objectives apply to elections in emerging democracies also. But there are other reasons for wanting an exit poll in these countries. An exit poll may be the only source of information about the outcome of an election for a considerable time after the election. In Russia's 1993 election it took several days before there was a representative tally of the vote by the election commission. This year the election commission reported a high percentage of the vote on election night itself, as in the US. They were organized and used computers in ways they had not previously done.

In Russia as in other new democracies there was a more important reason to want an exit poll, which has to do with establishing the credibility of the election result. There was wide-spread suspicion at the time of the first-round election that there would be cheating at the polling place and fraud during the count. The Communists said the Yeltsin-dominated election commission would not produce an honest count. There also was fear that the Communists would disrupt the election at the polling place. Most news organizations did stories about the possibility of a fraudulent outcome.

Exit polls, when produced by neutral pollsters, are an independent verification of the result produced by the election commission. Independent verification of the election commission result was an explicit goal of the exit poll I conducted for the Mexican presidential election in 1994. No one in Mexico wanted a repeat of the 1988 situation. The result of that election was never accepted after the election commission mysteriously shut down its computer in the middle of the count. In other countries where fraud was mentioned as a possibility before the election a confirming independent projection usually was enough to make the official outcome credible, or to challenge it.

After the first-round vote the outcome of the first presidential election in the Russian Federation was widely accepted. None of the candidates challenged the authenticity of the count, including Zyuganov. Nor was the result challenged by the press. They, too, accepted it. In the days leading up to the runoff, the potential for fraud was not discussed by the media. The voters seemed satisfied also. A large majority told our exit pollsters they believed the runoff election was conducted fairly.



*Warren Mitofsky is president,
Mitofsky International*