

Was 1996 Really “The Pollsters’ Waterloo?”

by Kathleen A. Frankovic

Everett Carll Ladd launched an attack on the 1996 pre-election polls in a most public forum—the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 1996. His opinion piece, “The Pollsters’ Waterloo,” was described as “excerpted” from *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* November 22 issue. Ironically, Ladd disregarded both polling history and contemporary polling research in his effort. In doing so, he may have put the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at risk, since it is the very enterprise that stakes its reputation on the data he’s attacking.

“*Ladd’s claim of exit poll overstatement of the Democratic vote was true in 1988 and 1992, but not in 1994 or 1996, or in any other year since 1967.*”

The reference to “Waterloo” comes from a chapter in *The British General Election of 1992* called “The Waterloo of the Polls,” which Ladd mentioned in the penultimate paragraph of the *Chronicle* article. The *Chronicle* entitled the article “The Election Polls: An American Waterloo,” thereby spreading the blame among journalists, the public and the pollsters. The *Journal* piece, on the other hand, had only one focus: calling the election of 1996 “The Pollsters’ Waterloo.”

The *Journal* is fond of pollster-bashing. Immediately after the election its lead editorial, “Election Disparities,” referred not to the election results but to polls and “errant pollsters.” No wonder the editors ran Ladd’s opinion piece alongside their editorials.

Ladd called on “polling experts today [to promptly call] together a group of high professional standing to review what went wrong and why, and to suggest corrective measures.” This group, “a blue ribbon panel of experts—from academia, commercial polling firms and the news media,” would be “a panel of experts so prestigious and obviously inclined to fairness—not finger-pointing—as to win [pollsters’] confidence.”

Ladd bases his call for a commission on four claims. Each deserves discussion, but each is more claim than fact.

1. “Election polling had a terrible year in 1996...worse than 1948.” In 1948, the Gallup Poll was 10 points off the final margin. It came the closest of all the public polls. In 1996, only

one poll (CBS News/*New York Times*) was that far off the margin (that occurred in the CBS News report of the poll, the *Times* reported Clinton 50%, Dole 34%, Perot 8%). And with this exception, the final poll results that Ladd included in his articles were *all* very close to the results of the election.

Ladd excluded information about poll timing, thus equating polls with different field periods. Some of the polls interviewed through the last night of the campaign, while others completed interviewing during the week prior to the election. According to the VNS national exit poll, 17% of voters hadn’t made a final decision as to how to vote until the last week of the campaign, suggesting more fluidity in the minds of the voters than they indicated earlier. Only a third of those who decided during this period of revelations about Democratic campaign financing supported Bill Clinton. The bulk of the late deciders supported Bob Dole, in essence validating the difference between pre-election polls and the final result. Voters who made up their minds in the last week of the campaign were responsible for a change of at least four percentage points in the final margin.

2. “Of late, both pre-election surveys and exit polls on election day frequently have missed the mark by margins well in excess of the Gallup results in 1948.” Words such as “frequently” and “well in excess” are uncomfortably vague—as those of us who ask questions for a living know.

No national survey in recent years has been off “well in excess” of the Gallup results, however that phrase is defined. Nearly two-thirds of all final *state* polls in 1996 were within three points of the election margin. Of all the state presidential exit polls in 1996, only one was off by as much as Gallup in 1948, and *none* “missed the mark by margins well in excess of the Gallup results in 1948.”

3. “Election polls have frequently overestimated the Democrats’ share of the vote....Supporters of Democratic candidates are more likely to respond to polls than are Republicans, who may distrust the ‘liberal’ news media.” Ladd’s source is Warren Mitofsky, an originator of exit polling, who has denied saying this. In fact, in Ladd’s original draft, he cites a 1993 interview with Mitofsky, one without a partisan reference. Linking response rate to Republicans’ apparent unwillingness to speak to the “liberal” news media were words put into Mitofsky’s mouth by editors at the *Chronicle* and the *Journal*. How or why Ladd allowed this is unclear.

Ladd’s claim of exit-poll overstatement of the Democratic vote was true in 1988 and 1992, but *not* in 1994 or 1996, or in any other year since 1967. State exit polls show *no* consistent partisan pattern in recent years.

In fact, in the 1992 New Hampshire and Georgia Republican primaries, exit polls overstated support for Pat Buchanan,

perhaps the most anti-Democratic of the Republican primary contenders. The same thing happened in the 1996 Republican primary there. But it is hard to believe that the difference is anything more than a difference between voters who were vehemently making a choice and voters who were generally unhappy with their vote.

As for pre-election polls, any consistent overstatement of Democratic support should be visible in all races, as well as in partisan identification. This year, highly visible polls in New Jersey and Massachusetts understated the Democratic Senate vote. The deviation from the reported final pre-election vote for the US House of Representatives and the actual outcome (an equal share of votes for Republicans and Democrats), depending on the poll, by turn "favored" both the Democrats and the Republicans.

There is a running debate over the nature and the solidity of party identification. Last June, Anthony Fabrizio, pollster for the Dole campaign, claimed media polls were not weighting their sample to the "correct" partisan identification. Party identification is not immutable, so it is difficult to imagine what that "correct" partisan distribution is. The probable electorate in the final pre-election CBS News/*New York Times* Poll (the one furthest off) was 39% Democrat, 32% Republican. The Zogby Poll, which had an eight-point margin on the horseshoe, weighted party identification to 34% Democrat, 34% Republican. The final party identification results from the national exit poll were 39% Democrat, 35% Republican. Which poll was more "correct"?

4. "Polling organizations must be willing to share information on their methods, which normally is very closely held."

Is it? All of the media organizations specifically mentioned in Ladd's articles—CBS News/*New York Times*, NBC/*Wall St. Journal*, ABC News/*Washington Post*, Harris, and CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup—currently contribute their data sets to the Roper Center.

In addition, most of these national polls had their methodologies described (in excruciating detail) in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1995) by D. Stephen Voss, Andrew Gelman, and Gary King. Even John Zogby, a relative newcomer to the media polling world has reported his methods in great detail—on the Reuters wire service, in *The Polling Report* (November 18, 1996), and at a press conference he called after the election.

Few if any pollsters would argue with the importance of disclosure. The American Association for Public Opinion Research and the National Council on Public Polls for decades have required disclosure of polling methods. In fact, Ladd's suggestions for polling research (on refusal rates and the impact of telemarketing) are normal topics of concern at AAPOR, in the pages of *POQ* and in *The Public Perspective*.

The Pollsters of 1996

Certainly, my response does not suggest that all is right in the polling world. Journalists writing about poll findings may have had what Ladd called a "terrible year," ignoring their skepticism and expecting polls to have the precision of a laser beam. In that way, the reporters of 1996 were much like the reporters of 1948.

In 1948, at least one reporter claimed his editor refused to print stories about the strong finish of the Truman campaign because it went against the pre-

vailing polls. In 1996, instead of deciding the race was over, as Ladd claims they did, reporters desperately clung to any indication that the margin was narrowing. Clinton's problems—including perceptions of his lack of honesty—were major concerns of pollsters and journalists.

But even the most sophisticated of polling analysts yearned to create meaning and movement this year. CNN's Bill Schneider was willing to claim that Clinton "may have lost momentum" because of the Whitewater case—based on shifts of only two percentage points in CNN's tracking poll.

Reuters, in reporting its poll, frequently imputed meaning to changes as small as several tenths of a percentage point, attributing to a survey sample the same precision as changes in body temperature, the Consumer Price Index, and the unemployment rate. No one recently has argued that thermometers need investigation, though doubts have been raised about the accuracy of the unemployment rate and the appropriateness of the Consumer Price Index. Pollsters continually question their findings and methods, in part because they recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of the survey method.

The appearance of Ladd's opinion piece in the *WSJ* has affected the high opinion many in the survey research industry have held of him. His claims are not as "fair" as he says his hypothetical commission would be. It's surprising to find Ladd making statements about survey research that are demonstrably not true, or suggest that he is out of touch with ongoing research projects in the survey community. The director of the Roper Center ought to know better.



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