Reporting the Polls: You Can Do Better

by Robert M. Worcester

Four years ago, in an article entitled "A View from Britain: You Can Do Better (Public Perspective, November/December 1992), I pointed out that the way in which American polls are reported confuses journalists and commentators, never mind the public, and ensures that American pollsters end up with egg on their faces no matter how right they are. In every election I can recall, and that goes back to 1948, reports showed apparent sharp shifts in poll results during the final days of the campaign. This largely resulted from eight weeks of reporting on "registered voters," and then in the ninth week, finally reallocating the "don't knows," the undecideds and the refusals.

In their final polls in the 1992 election Gallup and Harris were on the right track in repercentaging the results to put each candidate's share on a basis comparable to the election result. To do this, they left out respondents who said they don't know (who often don't care and in the election mostly don't vote). It doesn't matter so much whether the "don't knows" are reallocated in proportion to the results given by those who do have a response, or by some formula that uses other data (e.g., economic confidence), so long as they are repercentaged out of the reported result.

On average, the eight polls this time overestimated Clinton's share by two points, underestimated Dole's by three, and overestimated Perot's by one, thus giving the "gap-watchers"—that is, most political commentators and nearly all the attention-paying public—a very misleading picture of the race for the White House. In the event, the average gap reported in the final polls was five points wider than actually occurred, and in the case of the CBS/*New York Times* results, an 11-point error on the gap was made, forecasting a 19% lead for Clinton—results of which, alas, I used in my election day comments on the BBC World Service Television. This finding was wider of the mark than any of the polls in the British 1992 election for which we took (and are taking) so much stick.

But all of this analysis is not based upon the results given to the American people, because nobody, except the British-trained Humphrey Taylor (during the election campaign) and Jim Norman of *USA Today* (in his post-election analysis) reallocated the don't knows. On the data reported on television and in most newspapers, there was a nine-point gap between Zogby and CBS/*NYT* on the Clinton share. The reported Zogby results appeared to underestimate Clinton by five, and Dole by four, yet when the 10% reported as "don't knows" were reallocated, Zogby had the correct share for each candidate, and made the correct gap call. The reason: allegedly that Zogby adjusts for probable higher turnout of Republicans and does not push the undecideds with a "leaner" question. But in 1992, all six final polls were within one percent of the Bush share. Never mind. Well done Zogby, whoever you are!

I wrote in 1992 that in some ways, pollsters in America are their own worst enemies. Clearly, nobody (except possibly Jim Norman) paid the slightest bit of attention. Why? Is it that American pollsters don't believe anybody outside the US can teach them anything? Or is it that reallocation is somehow unmanly? Or statistically unsound? Or empirically unproven? Or do they not read Public Perspective? I hope the table below strengthens my case.

THE OPINION POLLS IN THE 1996 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Client & Pollster	Hotline/ Battleground	CBS/ New York Times	Pew Research Center	Reuter/ Zogby	Harris	ABC	NBC/Wall Street Journal	Gallup/CNN USA Today		
Fieldwork	10/28-31	10/30-11/2	10/31-11/3	11/1-3	11/1-3	11/2-3	11/2-3	11/3-4	Maximum	
Reported	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	-Minimum	
Clinton	45	53	49	44	51	51	49	49	9	
Dole	36	35	36	37	39	36	37	36	7	
Perot	8	9	8	7	9	8	9	9	2	
Other (Assumed)	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	
TOTAL REALLOCATED	91	99	95	90	100	99	97	96	Poll of Polls	Election Result
Clinton	49%	54%	42%	49%	51%	52%	51%	51%	51%	49.2%
Dole	40	35	38	41	39	39	38	38	38	40.8
Perot	9	9	8	8	9	7	9	9	9	8.5
Other	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1.5
Clinton Lead	9	19	14	8	12	13	13	13	13	8
Error on gap	1.00	10.60	10.00	0.40	3.60	4.60	4.60	4.60	4.60	
Rank order	2	8	7	1	3	4	4	4		

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