

# Why Most Polls Overestimated Clinton's Margin

By Humphrey Taylor

The final nationwide surveys conducted by nine polling firms came reasonably close to predicting President Clinton's 8.5% margin of victory. Analysis by Nick Panagakis of Market Shares Corporation shows a mean error by all the national polls on the three major candidates of 1.7 percentage points, which compares favorably with the 2.1 points in 1992 and is actually the best result for the last five presidential elections. However, all the polls except one—the Zogby/Reuters poll—overestimated Clinton's lead as they had in 1992, which prompts a question about whether there are some systematic sources of error affecting even the best designed, best conducted polls. In the 1996 presidential election, there are data which point to four sources of forecasting error—*differential non-response, late swing, differential turnout, and the "poll effect"*—although only one, differential non-response, is really a measurement

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error. The evidence suggests that in 1996 each of the four sources contributed modestly to overestimates of Clinton's lead. In many elections, pollsters are probably lucky that these types of error are not all pulling in the same direction and may be self-canceling.

Considering that all four sources of error were working simultaneously in 1996, it is remarkable that the polls' final forecasts were as accurate as they were. And although it is reassuring that these four elements rarely converge in the same election, pollsters who ignore them do so at their peril.

## Differential Non-Response Attributed to Refusals and Non-Availability

Of all of the possible sources of error, differential non-response is the most difficult to estimate, let alone measure, and therefore it is the hardest for which to make any compensating adjustment. To make matters worse, it is a massive source of potential error with most polling firms reporting refusal rates in the 35% to 45% range. These rates do not include a substantial number of telephones that are unanswered, some of which are working, residential lines to homes with eligible adult respondents (others are offices or non-working numbers). The size of this segment of non-response depends on the sampling frame and is generally unknown. Typically, surveys conducted over three days with two or three call-backs only achieve interviews with 30% or less of all the numbers dialed, which may mean that their true response rates (defined as the percentage of all possible eligible households) are well below 40%. Additionally, some polls select individuals within households using methods such as the "birthday rule" or random selection grids, which result in further non-response if the person cannot be reached after several call-backs.

All public opinion polls operate on the assumption that, after some weighting, the replies of the minority of eligible people surveyed are representative of the total universe, including those who were not interviewed. Miraculously it seems that this assumption is nearly true in most surveys where we can validate the responses against

other data from reliable sources. However, even very small biases are of critical importance in election polling where errors, or increased errors, of one or two points can be the difference between a good and a bad forecast.

The absence of good data about the effects of non-response (including non-availability and refusal) is, therefore, unfortunate even if the reasons for this absence are obvious (it is difficult to get accurate data about the likely voting behaviors of people you do not reach). While we can, and do, compensate for demographic biases, we do not know how well this weighting compensates for errors on other variables.

There are, however, a few shreds of evidence available to assess the effects of non-response. In Britain, the Market Research Society's report on the poor performance of British polls in 1992 concluded that differential refusal, with slightly more Conservative than Labour Party supporters refusing to be interviewed, was one of three sources of error (the other two were late swing votes and flaws in sample design).

In several presidential elections, the exit polls—which unlike the pre-election polls do not have to worry about either late swing or differential abstention—appear to slightly overestimate the Democratic and underestimate the Republican votes. The magnitude of this error is unknown because the exit pollsters publish their final numbers only *after* they have adjusted them to agree with the actual election outcome (thus error is not easily detected). The disparity in estimates, however, occurs in the numbers generated by the exit polls, as shown on subscriber's screens, before they are adjusted for any actual votes cast and released publicly.

Here again the errors are probably small. However, the exit polls clearly failed to predict the 1996 New Hampshire Senate race. In this case, the Republican vote was overestimated and

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the Democratic vote underestimated, which is consistent with the theory that Republicans are slightly more likely to refuse to be interviewed than Democrats.

One hypothesis sometimes advanced (e.g., see Everett Ladd in the November 19 *Wall Street Journal*) to explain the theory of higher Republican than Democratic refusal is that some Republicans are hostile to the supposedly liberal press and are therefore more likely to refuse to be interviewed. However, in Britain, where differential refusal is better documented than it is in the US, the press is overwhelmingly pro-Tory and yet it is the Tory (i.e., Conservative) supporters who appear more likely to refuse to be interviewed.

### Late Swing

There is much evidence that the gap between Clinton and Dole diminished somewhat between late September and November 1. There is also evidence of a net swing to Dole (i.e., a reduction in Clinton's lead) over the last few days of the campaign. There is even evidence that this late swing to Dole continued through Monday, November 4, after almost all the polls had stopped interviewing.

During the last six weeks of the campaign, almost all of the national polls (except the Zogby/Reuters poll) showed some reduction in Clinton's lead. At Louis Harris, we used an identical likelihood of voting interviewing screen (indicating that the trend could not have resulted from any tightening of the screen) which showed that the lead fell from 21% to 16% between late September and early November. Several other polls showed more movement.

Gallup, the only poll to continue interviewing through Monday, November 4, showed some evidence of a continuing, late swing to Dole. The Gallup data, using identical methods,

showed Clinton with a 16-point lead for November 2-3, and a 13-point lead for November 3-4. (However, Gallup had reported a 13-point lead for October 30-November 1 and November 1-2, which suggests the evidence is not strong).

Other evidence of a late swing to Dole is provided by the exit poll conducted by VNS for the television networks (see Table 1). More Dole voters than Clinton voters said they had decided whom to support very late in the campaign. Gallup data based on a post-election survey reported similar findings.

**Table 1: When Voters Decided Whom To Vote For**

	Clinton Voters	Dole Voters
Last three days	8%	11%
Last week (but not last three days)	4	7
<b>Total in last week</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>

**Source:** Exit poll by Voter News Service, November 5, 1996.

### Differential Turnout (Differential Abstention)

The final pre-election Harris Poll provided strong evidence of differential abstention, or differential turnout, with Dole supporters being more likely to vote than Clinton supporters. Arguably, the extent of this differential turnout was underestimated.

Harris, like most (but not all) other national polls, uses a screen to identify likely voters. However, this is not a simple, binary, screen-in or screen-out process. In total,

**Table 2: The Effect of Using Tighter Screens**

Screened In	Definition	Clinton Lead
62%	Registered, "absolutely" or "quite" likely to vote	16 points
54%	Registered and "absolutely" certain to vote	14 points
54%	Registered, "absolutely" or "quite" certain to vote, and (if old enough) voted in 1992	13 points
49%	Registered, "absolutely" certain to vote and (if old enough) voted in 1992	12 points
49%	Election Result	8.4 points

**Source:** Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, November 1-3, 1996.

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62% of all 1,999 adults contacted in the final survey screened-in on the basis of three questions. They claimed to be registered voters *and* they said they were “absolutely certain” or “quite certain” to vote, or they had already voted by mail. However, our experience told us that many of these people would not vote and therefore we considered various tighter screens. One screen eliminated those who were only “quite certain” to vote; another omitted those who said they were old enough to have voted in 1992 but did not do so. In the end we used all of these screening questions in exactly the same way we had in 1992 (when Harris’ final prediction of a 6-point Clinton victory compared to the actual margin of 5.5 points) (see Table 2).

We also looked at other possible screening questions (such as only including those who said the result of the election “would make a big difference” to them), which reduced the likely voters, and Clinton’s lead, even further. However, we did not use these questions as screens because they would have reduced the turnout far below 49%, and because the questions we did use had worked so well in 1992 and in other elections.

Other polling firms apparently observed a similar phenomenon with tighter screens producing lower Clinton leads. If Harris’ data and their data are reliable—and they are certainly more consistent with the results—we were correct in assuming a measure of differential turnout which hurt Clinton more than Dole. Quite possibly we underestimated it.

### The “Poll Effect” During the Campaign

Some Republicans have argued that the many polls showing large leads for Clinton from well before the conventions until Election Day damaged Dole’s chances of winning.

This assertion is difficult to verify because we cannot do a controlled experiment—two identical elections, one with and one without published polls. Yet I do not doubt that polls have a huge impact on the campaign even if we cannot measure it. Polls affect how the media report the campaign and the candidates (a winning candidate is usually described as running a good campaign, a losing candidate is criticized for campaign failures). Polls can affect fund raising, and they surely affect

the morale of candidates and their campaign workers. They influence decisions made by the candidates (for example, whether to debate and what tactics to adopt). State polls influence decisions about where to campaign.

It is not obvious what, if anything, should be done differently even if polls were proven to have a massive effect. Polls are after all, for all their weaknesses, the only reasonably reliable way of measuring who is ahead and by how much, and in a free society the public should be entitled to have the best available information about the election. In the United States, of course, that right is protected by the First Amendment. The public interest requires—but cannot mandate—reliable and unbiased reporting and reliable and unbiased polling. If these polls (or the media) influence the result, so be it. As British Prime Minister James Callaghan once wrote, “If people cannot be trusted with opinion polls, they cannot be trusted with the vote.”

Incidentally, this presidential election provides yet more evidence, and strong evidence, that polls usually do not have a “bandwagon effect.” President Clinton’s lead in 1996 peaked in early September and then shrank. People jumped off, rather than on, his bandwagon.

**Table 3: Likelihood of NOT Voting if Polls Show Clinton Almost Certain to Win**

**Question:** If the opinion polls show that Bill Clinton is almost certain to win with a big majority, is it—very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely or not at all likely—that you will NOT vote because there is no real point in doing so?

	Would Vote for:		
	Total	Clinton	Dole
Very likely NOT to vote	9%	10%	9%
Somewhat likely	4	4	1
Not very likely	12	12	9
Not at all likely	67	66	74
Don't know	8	8	7

**Note:** Survey of likely voters

**Source:** Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, November 1-3, 1996.

**Table 4: Expected Result of Presidential Election**

**Question:** Which of the following do you think will best describe the result of the presidential election?

	Total	Would Vote for:	
		Clinton	Dole
Bill Clinton will win with a big majority	37%	<b>54%</b>	<b>14%</b>
Bill Clinton will win with a small majority	34	34	32
It will very close	21	11	34
Bob Dole will win with a big majority	1	-	2
Bob Dole will win with a small majority	6	*	16
Don't know	2	1	2

\* = less than 0.5%

**Note:** Survey of likely voters

**Source:** Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, November 1-3, 1996.

**The “Poll Effect” on Election Day**

The final Harris Poll conducted on November 1-3 included data which support, but do not prove, the theory that the large Clinton leads shown by the polls, led more Clinton than Dole supporters not to vote, because they believed their votes were not needed.

Nine percent of likely voters told Harris that “if the opinion polls show that Bill Clinton is certain to win with a big majority” they would be “very likely NOT to vote, because there is no real point in doing so” (see Table 3).

These people include 10% of Clinton supporters and 9% of Dole supporters which might suggest that this effect of the polls would reduce the support for both candidates equally.

However, this presupposes that equal proportions of Dole and Clinton supporters believed Clinton would win with a large majority, and that is very far from the truth. Indeed, fully 54% of Clinton supporters and only 14% of Dole supporters expected that Clinton would “win with a big majority” (see Table 4).

If equal proportions of these people (54% of Clinton’s likely voters and 14% of Dole’s) did not vote, the effect was to reduce Clinton’s lead. If there was a poll effect, this may have been the cause of the greater-than-predicted differential turnout.

**In Conclusion**

The evidence suggests that in the 1996 presidential election, four factors caused the final pre-election polls to

overestimate President Clinton’s vote and underestimate Senator Dole’s vote. Of the four, only differential response (due to refusals and non-availability) is an error of measurement. The other three—late swing, differential turnout, and the “poll effect”—are forecasting errors. The evidence also suggests that in this election all four of these factors were working together, which explains why eight of nine national polls overestimated Clinton’s lead.

The good news is that the polls were quite accurate. If these four factors all contributed to the overestimate of the Clinton lead, no one of them can have had more than a small effect. However, in very close elections, they could be (and probably have been) the difference between showing the winner ahead or “getting the election wrong.”



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