The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

Survey research, like most forms of scientific inquiry, tends to focus on things that can be most easily measured. But this can be a problem when we ignore the more difficult dimensions. The challenge before the survey industry is to shift its focus to the lesser-known area of non-sampling errors and, in particular, the bias from non-response.

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The value of a properly-conducted survey over other forms of data collection lies in the ability to generalize from estimates based on a sample of respondents to characteristics and opinions of the population as a whole within a measurable range of sampling error. The assumption behind this statistical inference is that each element of the population has a definable chance of being in the sample. But this assumption is rarely met and the "margin of error" provided is only part of the total error. In a sense, we not only act as though the part of the sidewalk covered by the light is the whole sidewalk, but we also use the margin of error as the only measure of the accuracy of our description.

There are not clear standards for documenting a survey's response rates and it is rare for an organization or publication to do so. Most organizations have reported serious drops in response rates and there is little on the horizon to head off this decline. The low rates affect the credibility of survey estimates. Few will be interested in paying for survey estimates that can't even be generalized to half of the population.

However, just increasing the response rate is not necessarily the answer. Last year in Voter News Service exit polling in New Jersey and New York City, we experimented with different ways of increasing our response rate. We made a small increase in the response rate but found that it also increased the bias in our estimates within the precincts. Thus, while increasing response rates is an important challenge, quantifying their impact on survey estimates and developing a handle on the bias is actually more important.

Many organizations use some form of non-response adjustment based on demographics such as age and education. It seems reasonable to assume that these procedures improve the data because they make the survey demographics look more like the population. However, we really don't know how much the adjustments improve the data. In fact, we don't have a good way of describing the potential bias from non-response or any way of evaluating a correction for it.

The increasing use of the Internet for surveys may bring the issue of accounting for bias and total error more into focus. The cost of survey administration on the Internet is low and the potential population is large but limited in scope. These surveys will have low-sampling error because large samples are easy to obtain, but they will likely also have a high non-response rate in addition to poor coverage of the US population. Should these methods be immediately rejected because they are biased? Or can we ask the more honest question: how much more bias is there? Perhaps in this dialogue we will develop better methods of measuring bias and correcting for it.

We will make better comparisons of methods and better use of data when the "error" being used is the *total* error of the survey. Even though the entire sidewalk is not as well lit as it is under the street light, our vision may improve as we broaden our scope to include the dark areas—we may find something of real value there.

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Scrutinizing Our Accepted Practices
By Warren J. Mitofsky

Many things we do, whether in survey research or in other parts of our lives, we do almost by rote. We do them without question, without doubt, and without wondering if there is a better way. And for the most part, that's probably the way it should be. But not always. Once in a while it helps to take the most ordinary things we do and ask if there is a better way.

The same goes for our survey research practices. Ordinary things need to be questioned. For example, when biased survey designs, like those used by the Ohio mail-in postcard poll and Zogby International's political polls, produce relatively consistent election estimates, rather than dismiss them as flukes, it seems better to look for the reason why. While I would not, at this time, advocate designing a political poll the way these surveys are designed, both are doing something pollsters should learn from. It seems clear that they are doing something right, even though it differs from currently accepted practices.

The key to progress, innovation, and development of something better is approaching familiar problems with methods we have not used before, or tackling problems we could not solve before. If something significant seems impossible then it is worthy of attention.

I have included a few examples of accepted thinking or practices we might challenge. These are not intended necessarily as the most significant problems. Instead, they illustrate different ways to look at familiar subjects.

1. Are neutral questions really the best way to get at opinion, or would we be better served with loaded questions designed to see whether the public could be polarized on each side of an issue and how many people would shift sides depending on the question? This idea occurred to me when reviewing the many questions on abortion. Each set of questions produces different divisions about the size of the pro- and anti-abortion groups. The loaded-question approach might get at intensity of opinion as well as direction.

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2. The way we determine likelihood of voting in election polls does not work. I have yet to see a good likely-voter screen for low-turnout elections like primaries. What the likely-voter screen really does is compensate for an inability to measure the correct number of registered voters. Independent measures of registration show that there are fewer registered voters than most election-poll results show. We also know that almost everyone registered to vote where they currently live votes in presidential elections. If polls measured registration correctly, we would not need a likely-voter question for presidential elections but we would need a measure of likely voters, which we do not have, for other elections.

3. Improving survey response rates is a laudable goal. Most survey analysts treat nonresponse as random. Rather than trying to improve response rates, another, perhaps more fruitful approach, is designing experiments within on-going surveys to measure the relationship between response rates and characteristics we are interested in. For example, we could analyze the differences among results on successive calls to households that had not previously responded. After four calls a subsample of nonrespondents would continue to be called for as long as there was nonresponse, maybe up to 20 attempts to complete an interview. Those who refuse could be called back more than once as is now the practice. From this we would learn if the effect of nonresponse was random or if it introduced bias.

Many more survey research practices are taken for granted. We should challenge them and be willing to change.

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Representing the Views of Multi-Lingual Populations
By Susan H. Pinkus

There are many challenges the survey research industry currently faces—pseudo polls (i.e., the Internet and call-in surveys), declining response rates, proliferating non-voice phone lines for modems and faxes, and, of course, the cellular phone phenomenon. But the greatest challenge to the *Los Angeles Times* Poll is conducting surveys in California that accurately represent the multi-lingual population and yet still maintain the integrity and statistical reliability that deadlines and the *LA Times* demand.

The *Times* Poll has been criticized by the state's Asian-American community for allegedly excluding Asians from samples. They have reached this conclusion because poll stories usually report only the attitudes of whites, Latinos, and blacks when racial and/or ethnic subgroups are discussed. Asian-Americans don't realize that English-speaking Asian-Americans are included in every sample if they are part of the population being polled. In order to curb some of the criticism, the *LA Times* has reached out to Asian-Americans by holding town-hall meetings with community leaders to hear their concerns and discuss polling methodology. We have explained that we never cite a subgroup with less than 100 respondents in a cell and Asians usually fall into that category. Although the Asian community has increased sharply in California, at about 10% they remain a relatively small share of the adult-age population. And when looking at voters and likely voters, the incidence of Asian-Americans declines further.

The language barrier is another hinderance. Unfortunately, time and budgetary constraints make it nearly impossible to offer the questionnaire in languages other than English and Spanish and, therefore, we only interview Asian-Americans who speak English. In separate *Times* polls of Asians, many respondents said they would prefer the survey be in their language—45% of Chinese-Americans, 46% of Filipino-Americans, 89% of Vietnamese-Americans, and 91% of Korean-Americans.

Achieving this result would require finding interviewers who speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese...you get the point. Not only would we need multi-lingual interviewers, we would also need the surveys translated into all these languages. We recently completed a comprehensive survey on education and wanted to analyze parental opinions by the state's major ethnic and racial groups. The portion of the sample reaching Asian parents had to be "farmed out." The survey was translated into five languages and netted 150 completed interviews; it took two weeks and cost $25,000.