

## Afterword: America Speaks...Again

If we can believe the polling industry's self-congratulatory evaluations, the polls did a just dandy job in the 2008 presidential election. The National Council on Public Polls (NCPP), a Washington-based association of polling organizations, reported that the 19 presidential polls making final election predictions "came very close to the election outcome." The average "candidate" error (the difference between each poll's final estimate and the election results for each of the major presidential candidates) "is less than one percentage point (0.9)." That was the same error rate reported by NCPP in 2004, and only slightly smaller than the 1.1 percentage point average in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

NCPP admits that this type of assessment is limited. "We strongly believe a poll's performance should be based on its overall reporting about the issues and dynamics of a political campaign, and not one number." Nevertheless, NCPP refuses to make any evaluations beyond that "one number," claiming that "we can only assess voters' actual preferences for candidates at the end of the campaign."<sup>2</sup> By so doing, NCPP is able to avoid confronting the embarrassing performance of the polls during the primary season, and also during the general election campaign.

### The Convergence Mystery

Despite the close finish of the final pre-election polls in 2008, they reported quite different results during the campaign. Even in the last week of October, the polls reported contradictory trends. Pew, for example, showed Obama leading by 15 points, and CBS reported an 11-point lead. At the other end of the spectrum, the Investors Business Daily found Obama up by only four points, while the George Washington University battleground poll said just three. A few days later, the latter two polls reported a surge in support for Obama, while the previous two polls showed a sudden decline, resulting in final predictions that were close to each other and to the election results.

In an article in *Survey Practice*, I referred to this phenomenon as a "convergence mystery." How could the polls show such different results during the campaign, but then suddenly converge to a narrow range in the period just before the election?<sup>3</sup> On NPR, Pew's Andrew Kohut addressed the issue: "The closer we get to the election, the more crystallized public opinion is and therefore the more likely it is when we make a telephone call, we're going to get the same answers as another polling organization will get."<sup>4</sup> He essentially concurs with my central argument about pre-election polling – that because media pollsters refuse to measure voter uncertainty during the campaign, their polls don't accurately measure voter intentions until right before the election, when the vast majority of voters have finally made up their minds. Prior to that, we can't trust the results.

### The Media Oracles

Since the advent of television, the networks have engaged in a mostly useless and highly risky competition to quickly project the winners on election night. This effort costs the networks large sums of money, though typically their projections beat the full vote count by no more than a couple of hours. Still, if a single network were to forego the competition and routinely lag behind the other networks in reporting the victors, it would

lose much of its news-oriented audience – perhaps permanently. That, at least, is the theory under which the network chiefs have operated for decades.

The data collection is sponsored by a media consortium, the National Election Pool (NEP), consisting of the five major networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC), along with the Associated Press (AP). In the past two presidential elections, the projections in all the states have been mostly correct, though previous experience suggests that viewers need to be cautious about assuming accuracy for every call. The competition to be first in calling the races is still evident, suggesting that the networks have learned little from the 2000 Election Night disaster. They made several miscalls that night, including two projections in Florida – one at about 8:00 PM Eastern time, predicting Al Gore the winner, and the other at about 2:20 the next morning, predicting George W. Bush the winner and the next president of the United States. Both projections were rescinded by the networks about two hours after they were made, because the election was just too close to call. Even the networks admitted they had damaged the electoral process by their shabby performance.<sup>5</sup>

The first media consortium to project election winners was established after the 1988 election, because the networks found it too expensive to conduct their own separate exit polls, as they had been doing for the previous two decades. These polls are conducted throughout Election Day in a relatively small number of selected precincts in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, with the precincts chosen to represent the larger voting population in that state. At three specified time periods during the day, interviewers stop voters as they exit the voting location to ask if they will participate in the exit poll. Voters who agree are asked to fill out a short NEP ballot, which includes the names of the candidates running for president, U.S. Senator, and governor, and some additional questions – to include the voter's demographic characteristics and a few attitude questions. Once finished, voters deposit the form in a special NEP ballot box with the interviewers. At the end of each of the three time periods, interviewers call in the data to a central location, where all of the information is entered into a computer.

Since 2004, the media consortium has contracted with Edison/Mitofsky to provide the exit poll data, as well as the Election Night vote count. All the data are computer-analyzed using several statistical models, which take into account past voting records, expected turnout, and many other factors that could influence the voting outcome. The models are used to project the winner of the presidential contest in each state, as well as the gubernatorial and senatorial contests where appropriate.

The first available data come from the exit polls. Once all the voting precincts in a given state have closed, any of the networks may choose to project the winner based solely on those polls. Every member of the consortium is hooked into the central computer, with all of the voting models available to each network and to AP. In most cases, however, the networks will not project a race on the basis of exit polls alone, but will wait until actual vote counts are entered into the statistical models.

### **Reading Tea Leaves**

There is little advantage to viewers in the networks' competition to project the winners first, and as the experience in 2000 demonstrated, there is a serious risk of hurting the democratic process. But the exit poll data that contribute to the projection models are also quite useful in helping to understand the electorate. On election night, the

network experts analyze the data to show how different segments of people voted and how the issues influenced the vote choices.

We know, for example, that Obama did not win the election because he was especially successful in increasing the number of young people to turn out to vote, despite his campaign's use of the latest technology to appeal to younger voters. The exit polls<sup>6</sup> tell us that the under 30 crowd constituted only about 18 percent of the electorate, hardly different from the 17 percent four years earlier. However, Obama's margin of victory among these voters was much greater than John Kerry's in 2004 – an astounding 34-point advantage, compared with Kerry's 9-point margin. Obama also improved significantly over Kerry in the 30-44 age group, though he did about as well as Kerry among voters who were 45 years of age and older. Obama's victory, then, was caused not by increasing turnout among selective groups of voters, but by persuading voters under 45 to switch their allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic candidate.

This is the kind of observation made possible by the exit polls. Yet these polls can often be credited with a greater degree of precision than they deserve. And the simplistic data analysis on election night, as presented above, can be challenged by more sophisticated efforts later on.

Such was the case in the 2008 election with California's Proposition 8, which eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry. Journalists cited exit polls to conclude that African-Americans provided the "key support" that allowed Prop 8 to pass with a narrow 4.6 percentage point margin.<sup>7</sup> According to the exit polls, 70 percent of black voters supported the ballot measure, much greater than other minority groups.

Closer examination, however, led two New York-based professors to challenge this conclusion.<sup>8</sup> They found that when compared with results from pre-election and post-election telephone polls, the exit poll figures were outliers, showing black support for Prop 8 about 20 points higher than the average of the other polls. Moreover, the exit poll estimate that black voters constituted 10 percent of the electorate was much larger than most professionals familiar with California politics thought was credible.<sup>9</sup> The professors concluded that it was therefore unlikely that African-American voters provided the margin that killed same-sex marriage. Instead, they found that religiosity, party identification, and political ideology – not race – were the factors that best explained the California electorate's vote on Prop 8.

Mark Blumenthal later wrote that this controversy over interpreting the results is a reminder "about the need for all of us to be a bit more skeptical in the way we interpret exit polls, or [for] that matter, any other form of survey."<sup>10</sup>

Good point. But I would add: A *lot* more skeptical.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The National Council of Public Polls website,

[http://www.ncpp.org/files/NCPP\\_2008\\_analysis\\_of\\_election\\_polls\\_121808%20pdf\\_0.pdf](http://www.ncpp.org/files/NCPP_2008_analysis_of_election_polls_121808%20pdf_0.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Blumenthal, at pollster.com, looked at this phenomenon at the state level and found the same pattern there that I found at the national level. See his “More on the Convergence Mystery,” on pollster.com, Dec. 5, 2008, [http://www.pollster.com/blogs/more\\_on\\_the\\_convergence\\_myster.php](http://www.pollster.com/blogs/more_on_the_convergence_myster.php).

<sup>4</sup> See my satirical article, “Holy Gallup’s Ghost: Top Pollster Admits Early Election Polls Can’t Be Trusted,” on stinkyjournalism.org (<http://www.stinkyjournalism.org/latest-journalism-news-updates-138.php>, Nov. 11, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed look at what happened that night, and how the election night forecasting works, see my *How to Steal An Election: The Inside Story of How George Bush’s Brother and FOX Network Miscalled the 2000 Election and Changed the Course of History* (New York: Nation Books, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> All exit poll data referred to in this section come from CNN’s website, where the results are posted. For the 2004 results, see <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html> and for 2008, see <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Blumenthal’s post on this issue, at

[http://www.pollster.com/blogs/the\\_exit\\_poll\\_and\\_prop\\_8.php](http://www.pollster.com/blogs/the_exit_poll_and_prop_8.php), Jan. 15, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick J. Egan and Kenneth Sherrill, “California Proposition 8: What Does the Future Hold?” January 6, 2009 ([http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/issues/egan\\_sherrill\\_prop8\\_1\\_6\\_09.pdf](http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/issues/egan_sherrill_prop8_1_6_09.pdf)).

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<sup>9</sup> See the blog of Ta-Nehisi Coates on The Atlantic, [http://ta-nehisicoates.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/01/africanamericans\\_prop\\_8\\_and\\_the\\_beguiling\\_art\\_of\\_polling.php](http://ta-nehisicoates.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/01/africanamericans_prop_8_and_the_beguiling_art_of_polling.php), January 12, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark Blumenthal's post on this issue, at [http://www.pollster.com/blogs/the\\_exit\\_poll\\_and\\_prop\\_8.php](http://www.pollster.com/blogs/the_exit_poll_and_prop_8.php), Jan. 15, 2009. For other commentary on polls, see my website, <http://www.skepticalpollster.com>.

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