

Exit Polling: What's the Use?

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By Steven S. Ross

Many media organizations are rethinking the use of exit polls this year. It is not hard to figure out why. There was the collapse of the Voter News Service exit poll in the 2002 congressional elections. There's the issue of whether broadcasters should continue to hold back exit poll numbers until the polls close, while Web providers are posting leaked poll totals on their sites. There's resistance among election supervisors to allowing pollsters close to polling places. And then, there's the cost.

Here, I'd like to argue that exit polls are important for viewers. I'll also provide some basic advice about conducting these polls, even if you are on a budget. Finally, I'll discuss how to report these polls ethically.

Polling drives almost all of politics today. Candidates conduct early, confidential polls to show to their potential funders. Candidates also poll to find out what their positions are or should be on issues – the same way toothpaste companies poll to find features customers might pay for. During

the campaign, candidates "track" their progress with weekly or daily polls, to see how the public responds to their actions and to the actions of their opponents. Exit polls are the last, best chance the media has to explain the results of candidates' actions among specific voter groups.

Exit polling, done well, may provide a check against tampering with voting machines, too – either the new computer-based models or the ancient pull-lever behemoths. Neither leave a paper trail.

Exit polls are far more accurate than pre-election polling. The pollsters can talk to people who have actually voted, rather than people who might vote and who might change their mind. They are also much cheaper to field. Pre-election polling is usually done by phone, and most people contacted refuse to participate. Only one in five contacted by phone agree to be interviewed. In exit polling, which is done in person, refusal rates are far lower – typically two out of every three people approached agree to be polled. Whether you do your own

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polling or hire a polling firm or university, make sure that good methodology is followed.

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That does not mean exit polling is perfect. Voter News Service, the cooperative run by major media organizations and the Associated Press, overstated the Democrats' vote in 1992 because Perot voters were often unwilling to be interviewed as they left the voting area. Statistical Assessment Service (www.stas.org) reports that in two Republican primaries, New Hampshire in 1992 and Arizona in 1996, exit polls overestimated the vote for Pat Buchanan. In New Hampshire, the polls predicted a small win for George Bush; he beat Buchanan by 16 points. Bob Dole ran a close second to Steve Forbes in Arizona but the polls had him a poor third to Forbes and Buchanan. Evidently, Buchanan voters were more willing to talk to pollsters.

On the other hand, the confusion about the 2000 Presidential race was more an issue of mistakes reporting actual votes than it was of exit poll totals. In fact, the exit polling helped alert broadcasters to possible errors in the final tallies.

As in so many areas of American Society, race also plays a role. Statistical Assessment Service notes that in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election polls predicted that black candidate Douglas Wilder would win by 10 percent. He actually won by less than 1 percent. Apparently, many white voters lied to the pollsters.

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and they are more likely to vote Republican. Many in the military also vote by absentee ballot, and they, too, are more likely to vote Republican. On the other hand, the aged and infirm and more likely to vote Democratic. None of these voters can be found by exit polling.

The problem first surfaced in 1982 when exit polls wrongly predicted Democrat Jerry Brown had won over Republican Pete Wilson for United States Senate from California, and that Democrat Tom Bradley had beaten Republican George Deukmejian for governor. The large number of Republican absentee ballots made the difference.

Standard practice is to poll in precincts that are carefully chosen to balance the sample by race, ethnicity, income and past political preference. If the precincts are chosen wisely, the results of a poll of 1,000 voters should be within about 3 percent of the actual tally, 19 times out of 20.

But what if the candidates, the issues, and the political environment differ substantially from past elections? In such cases, there is little basis for choosing precincts to poll. For exit polling in this year's chaotic Democratic primaries, major media picked the precincts randomly. This added substantially to costs, because they needed to poll roughly 1,800 voters to get the same "within 3 percent" precision.

This sounds bizarre at first, but think about what happens when we "poll" a coin about voting heads or tails. Most people understand intuitively that if a perfectly balanced coin is tossed many thousands of times, the poll will end up even. Half the time the coin will vote "heads" and half the time it will vote "tails." We also understand that if we toss the coin only 10 times it may vote seven heads to three tails. We call this a "winning streak." Thousands of tosses have many such streaks, canceling each other out.

Choosing a person to be polled is like tossing a penny. One person may say Bush (Heads!). A second person, demographically identical, might choose Kerry (Tails!). The pollster might talk to one and not the other. To make sure the streaks cancel out, the pollster must talk to hundreds of voters.

It turns out that such "luck" is predictable. The mathematician Jacques Bernoulli lived between 1654 and 1705, so he never met a senator. But he understood the process. He calculated that if we poll the coin 1,000 times, we will rarely get a 500-500 tie. But 19 times out of 20 we will get a result between 465 and 535.

Statisticians call that "19 times out of 20" the confidence level. If you divide 19 by 20, you get 0.95, or 95 percent. The difference between 465 and 500 (or 500 and 535) represents the margin of error or confidence interval – 35, in our example. The 35 divided by 1,000 (the size of the sample) is 0.035, or 3.5 percent.

When reported for the first time, polls usually carry a disclaimer based loosely on Bernoulli's math. A poll of 1,000 people would include a statement that 95 percent of the time the reported

results fall within 3 percent of the results that could be expected if the entire electorate were polled.

That statement is roughly in line with one approved more than a decade ago by the American Statistical Association (ASA). It actually overstates the perfection (Bernoulli's formula would widen the error limits to plus or minus 3.5 percent). Also in line with the ASA, some news organizations note that error limits for subsamples are larger. They never say how much larger, however. Thus, if a broadcaster polls 1,000 people and 500 are women, the error limit for women's opinions is plus or minus 5 percent, at a 95 percent confidence level. For 100 black females in the sample, the error limit reaches more than 10 percent!

Remember, this assumes a perfectly drawn sample, which can never be. Furthermore, Bernoulli is fairly generous. Other mathematicians note that the error margin gets larger as the sample gets closer to a 50-50 split. The error margin also increases as the choices increase – in a three-way or four-way race, for instance.

The "gold standard" for polling is a confidence level of 95 percent – 19 times out of 20 the poll will be within a certain percent of reality. With so many polls, however, some are bound to be wrong – even if they are well done by a reputable firm. No poll I've read over the past decade points this out.

The Wall Street Journal and NBC News, for instance, conducted a joint poll throughout the Dukakis-Bush presidential race of 1988. On October 18, they reported a poll of more than 1,300 likely voters showing Bush ahead by 55 to 38 percent. No other large poll showed such a huge gap between the two candidates. Part of the reason may have

had to do with the timing – the poll was taken just after a debate that Bush was deemed to have won. My review of all polls taken during that last campaign month suggests that the poll simply fell among the 1 in 20 outside the error limit. The real gap was probably 50 percent to 43 percent. The chances of that happening were only about 1 in 100. Of course, the 55 percent to 38 percent gap was widely reported, drying up the last of Dukakis's campaign donation stream.

It is bad enough that news organizations don't include all the relevant statistical information in their own stories. Print media are often guilty

of this. Broadcast media are almost always guilty. They tend not to include any such information when they report on polls by others. This fools the viewers, who assume that news organizations apply their own good news judgment to determine whether the original report is worthy of repetition.

In fact, just the opposite is true. A poorly done poll is more prone to error, and thus more likely to produce "surprising" results. For journalists, another word for "surprising" is "newsworthy." We can do better. But we should not give up the idea of polling.

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New Ethics Rules for Polling

- News organizations have always argued that space does not permit the sophisticated statistical detail that would fully explain the polls they conduct or report upon. The Web has changed all of that. Now news organizations can refer readers to their websites for more detail. Here's how polls should be conducted and reported ethically:
- Exit poll results are normally not reported until polls have closed. But many broadcasters (wink, wink) betray the rule by making on-air statements such as "sources say Smedlap is doing extremely well today." Don't.
- National exit poll results paid for by the major networks and large print outlets will be leaked and reported on the Web as voting day progresses. But major Web operators will respect confidentiality and the property rights of those who paid for the poll in the first place. Decide ahead of time on what to do if smaller Web operators report incomplete results – either report the reports with an explanation as to why they are inaccurate (small sample size, no accounting for demographics of voters changing throughout the day) or (strongly preferred) ignore them.
- Confidence levels and error limits should be fully reported, in detail, for subsamples as well as for the overall sample. At the very least, news organizations should provide a calculator so that readers can do the math themselves.
- News organizations should also provide an estimate of how accurately the sample being polled was selected. This "sampling error" should be added to the random errors described above.
- When reporting on polls of others, news organizations should either provide full disclosure of error limits (as above) or set and disclose their own standards about what is reliable enough to report. For example, a news organization might decide that no poll with a sample smaller than 500 will be reported. This approach is particularly useful for broadcasters who do not have enough airtime to go into details.

- News organizations should report possible sources of bias (circumstances that can affect poll results) - for instance, breaking news, high refusal rates or a multiple-day or multiple-week sampling period.
- News organizations should publish the full text of the polling script used by telephone operators.
- Wherever possible, polls should ask questions in multiple ways about issues that are hazy in the public's mind (the economy, for example; see main story).
- News organizations should publish their complete data sets in a generally usable format (Excel, CSV, HTML, XML), so interested parties can do their own analysis and so multiple surveys can be more easily combined.

Conducting an Exit Poll

- Decide whether your only aim is to call the election early, or if you intend to gather more information (on sex, demographics, party affiliation, age, previous voting history, and race, for instance). More information is useful, but adds to costs. Often, broadcasters will partner with local print media. The latter wants the detail. Iron out the issues early in the planning stage because detail adds to costs and reduces the number of people that can be polled by a given size team.
- Discuss your project with local election officials. Many states have electioneering laws that do not allow anyone to approach voters within, typically, 100 feet of the voting place. In the late 1980s, these restrictions were ruled to be unconstitutional when applied to the press and pollsters. But they remain on the books in most states. Local officials are not necessarily schooled in Constitutional law. Election day is not the time to provide lessons. Get letters acceding to what you want to do.
- Allocate a few hours for training inexperienced team members.
- Make sure all team members and members of the campaign desk staff understand the need for confidentiality, and sign statements to that effect.
- Arrive early at the polling place, perhaps a half-hour before the polls open, to talk to officials and show copies of letters from higher officials, if necessary.
- At this time, arrange any camera shots inside the voting place that you might find necessary.
- Pick voters randomly. To do that, use a system. You might start out early, approaching everyone who leaves the voting place. But as volume increases, you will often find it necessary to count off every third or fifth person to approach. Be as orderly as possible. You will need to note the intervals, to scale the vote totals later.
- Ideally, work in teams. A spotter approaches voter, asks if he/she has voted for specific office.
- Usually, the voter should fill out voter questionnaire privately.
- Report poll results to your campaign desk throughout the day on scheduled intervals, so that data can be entered and analyzed in preparation for going public after the polls close.
- Get voter comments, especially on-camera comments, AFTER the questionnaire is returned.
- Expect to stay after the polls have closed, to catch late voters and handle standups.