political polls

Why did Dewey defeat Truman? How did Gore win and lose Florida? Political polls can be misleading, confusing, and poorly designed, but when done well, they are the best way to accurately gauge public opinion.

Political pollsters have two historical moments they would like to forget. On the morning after the 1948 presidential election, the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* headline blazed "Dewey Defeats Truman." That is what the polls predicted and what the *Tribune's* editors expected. But incumbent president Harry S. Truman surprised everyone when he, and not New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, was elected president of the United States.

More than 50 years later, on election night 2000, each of the major television networks trumpeted that Al Gore had won Florida, and that he would be the 43rd president of the United States. When George W. Bush was officially declared the victor, Dan Rather sheepishly acknowledged "We were wrong to call it as early as we did ... To err is human, but to really foul up requires a computer." Dan Rather's red-faced analysis isn't exactly correct. "Computers" are not to blame; the limits of exit polls are. The Bush/Gore embarrassment highlights the limitations of extrapolating from exit poll data, while the Truman/Dewey debacle revealed methodological problems that have long vexed political pollsters.

Experts still do not agree why Dewey was named the victor in 1948, but most say that the incident motivated the search for modern polling techniques. First, pollsters learned that they had to keep polling up until the last minute, because personal preferences could be guite volatile. Second, they moved from "quota sampling" to "random sampling." Quota sampling involves interviewing a set number of people from different ethnic and racial groups, whereas in random sampling each person in a given population has a greater chance of being called. Third, pollsters recognized that it is not only opinions that count, but whether or not the people who hold those opinions actually vote. Pollsters have developed sophisticated measures of who is likely to vote, and they now typically include only "registered voters" or "likely voters" in their samples. This sampling constraint is important because samples of "likely voters" tend to include fewer ethnic minorities, fewer union members, and more members of wealthy households, and thus tend to include more Republicans than do broad samples of "American adults."

While pollsters have resolved important sampling issues since 1948, new challenges have arisen. First, response rates are lower than ever before, hovering around 30 percent (and even lower in metropolitan areas). In an era of overzealous telemarketers, voice mail, and caller ID, potential interviewees are often too busy (or too skeptical) to pick up their phones and answer a pollster's questions. Affluent people often have two (or more) phones, which increases their chances of getting picked. Pollsters cannot assume that the people who do answer the survey questions are similar to those who do not, and they need to adjust (or "weight") their results accordingly. (See "Key Questions to Ask about Polls" on page 32 for more information about evaluating a poll's validity.)

The revolving-door declarations of the "winner" in the 2000 presidential election are generally blamed on two factors. First, news agencies extrapolated the results of initial election returns to the overall population—even when only a small fraction of returns were in. Second, the networks relied on exit-polling data supplied to them by Voter News Service (VNS), a consortium funded by the television networks and the Associated Press. VNS has accurately predicted many elections in the past; however, exit-poll data are notoriously weak when it comes to projecting a winner. Exit-poll data are obtained by asking people face-to-face how they voted as they exit their polling places. For exit polls to work, pollsters must rely on adequate and representative samples. Although the quality of the VNS data was considered to be quite good in 2000—and no better or worse than in past elections—exit polls are simply not good for predicting final outcomes in very close elections because of their margin of error. This was precisely the case in 2000, when Bush and Gore grabbed 47.9 percent and 48.4 percent of the popular vote, respectively. In the major news networks' scramble to be the "first" to announce the election winner, they had to base their declarations of the "winner" on early returns and extrapolations, when a more prudent move would have been to wait for actual votes to come in.

Yet exit polls do have several distinct strengths: they reveal how specific demographic groups voted and the reasons behind their votes. They also help to pinpoint voter turnout in demographic groups, which is important for voter registration drives and public awareness campaigns. Exit polls are at their worst when used to predict a winner.

On election night 2004, it appeared that overzealous newscasters and political commentators had learned their lesson about making claims based on exit-poll data. The networks were cautious about "calling" a state as pro-Bush or pro-Kerry until they had obtained actual return data from nearly all precincts in each state. They had good reason for being so cautious. In the days and weeks leading up to the election, potential voters were deluged on a daily basis by poll data, and on most days the gap between candidates was smaller than the poll's margin of error.

Moreover, with more than a dozen polls reported on a regular basis, the numbers varied widely. On any given day, some polls reported that Bush was ahead, while others put Kerry in the lead. Voters, networks, even the candidates themselves couldn't begin to speculate about who the winner would be. Although Kerry supporters felt a glimmer of hope during the afternoon of election day, when exit polls placed him in the lead, it was Bush supporters who ultimately celebrated the next day, when he was reelected the president of the United States.

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key questions to ask about polls

The National Council on Public Polls has drafted a list of questions that professional sociologists (and others) should ask when evaluating opinion data, including the following:

- **1. Who did the poll?** Reputable polling firms will provide the information you need to evaluate the survey's quality.
- 2. Who paid for the poll and why was it done? Organizations conduct polls to gain helpful information or to advance a certain cause. One must judge whether the motive for doing the poll creates doubts about its validity.
- **3.** How many people were interviewed for the survey? The more people interviewed, the smaller the margin of error.
- **4.** How were those people chosen? Random samples best ensure that all persons in a given population are accurately represented.
- 5. From what area (nation, state, or region) or group (lawyers, students, Democratic voters, etc.) were these people chosen? A poll can only reflect the opinions of all American adults if the interviewees were randomly chosen from among all American adults.
- 6. Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed? Be sure that the poll reports responses of all interviewees, not just those of one subgroup.
- 7. Who should have been interviewed but was not? Identify what steps were taken to minimize the failure of certain types of people to respond to interviewers.

- **8. When was the poll done?** Today's world events can dramatically affect tonight's poll results.
- **9. How were the interviews conducted?** The mode of interview—telephone, face-to-face, mail survey, the Internet—may affect important outcomes such as response rate and sample composition.
- **10. What about polls on the Internet?** As with all polls, evaluate the sample size and composition, method of recruiting respondents, and response rate.
- **11. What is the sampling error for the poll results?** The sampling error is the portion of the potential error in a survey introduced by using a sample rather than the entire population. A +/-3 percent margin of error is generally considered acceptable.
- **12. Who's on first?** If the gap between two candidates is less than the margin of error, you cannot conclude that one is "ahead of the other."
- **13. What other kinds of factors can skew poll results?**Question phrasing, question order, quality of interviewers, and data-processing errors can skew results.
- **14. What questions were asked?** The wording of a question can affect poll results, especially questions about sensitive topics.
- **15. In what order were the questions asked?** Questions asked prior to a poll's core question could sway results.
- **16. What do other polls on this topic show?** The results of other polls should be compared with the results you have in hand. If the results are different, find out why.