

The 2005 Los Angeles Exit Poll Pilot Project

An Alternative Sampling Technique

Introduction

In November 2000, exit poll interviews with voters in Florida indicated that Al Gore won the state. As a result, many television networks declared Gore the winner of Florida, a pivotal state to winning the presidency in 2000. Only a few hours later, official vote tallies from the Florida Secretary of State's office revealed that George W. Bush was in fact leading in Florida. After 45 days of recounts and lawsuits, it was clear that the exit polls were wrong; Bush had won the state by the narrowest of margins. As a result of the faulty exit polls, there was much planning and reanalysis of the methodology used in 2000, as pollsters prepared for the 2004 presidential election. The old system, Voter News Service (VNS) was scrapped entirely, and Edison-Mitofsky Research was chosen to implement a new, and more accurate exit poll in 2004. What happened? Exit poll results from Edison-Mitofsky showed John Kerry ahead in Ohio, Florida, and New Mexico – all states which he lost to Bush in 2004.

In addition to the overall exit poll results being skewed, comparative vote results for subgroups, such as Latino voters, also appeared to be wrong. The National Exit Poll (NEP) reported on November 2, 2004 that Bush won 45 percent of the Latino vote, a 10-point gain from 2000. In contrast, an exit poll of *only* Latino voters conducted by the William C. Velasquez Institute reported that Bush won only 32 percent of the Latino vote. Moreover, a pre-election survey of Latino voters by the *Washington Post* reported Bush garnering just 30 percent of the vote (see Leal, et. al. 2005).

What explains such discrepancies? One possibility is the methodology used to select the precincts where exit poll interviews are conducted is faulty. Ideally, the respondents in the exit poll survey will be accurate representatives of the entire city or state in which the election is being held. However, if the exit poll interviews respondents that are too conservative or too liberal, too young or too old, too poor or too rich, it could skew the overall results by a wide margin.

Since the November 2004 presidential election, there has been considerable media coverage of the exit poll controversy. The *New York Times* noted that Congressman John Conyers asked Edison-Mitofsky “to turn over raw data collected in Election Day exit polls, for investigation of any discrepancies between voter responses and certified election results”; a *Washington Post* headline read, “Report Acknowledges Inaccuracies in 2004 Exit Poll”; and CNN, which also noted the Kerry numbers were “overstated,” claimed that “CNN did not air those inaccurate results or post them on its website.” Thus, many scholars and pundits reached the conclusion that new alternatives to the traditional exit poll may be warranted. As a student enrolled in one of the Thursday evening courses, this is where you come in.

Exit Polling Methodology

As a student in one of the Thursday evening classes, you are being required to participate in a rigorous scientific endeavor, namely, testing a new methodology for exit polling.

Practitioners and consultants of exit poll projects spend considerable time designing and implementing their methodology. While a telephone survey has the advantage of calling any

registered voter within the state, an exit poll is limited to a small number of sites. Ideally, exit pollsters would set up stations at every single precinct within a jurisdiction, so that no voter is left out. Of course, it is not realistic to recruit 4,000 volunteers to man each of the 4,000 precincts in a state like California. Thus, the key is picking a select number of precincts that accurately represent the full universe of 4,000 throughout the state. If the “wrong” precincts are selected, the results may be biased. Therefore, exit poll research teams take considerable care to select precincts. However, their selection criteria may still be flawed, as the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections have revealed.

For an exit poll in the City of Los Angeles, pollsters would want to capture an accurate representation of Los Angeles voters. For example, if 50 percent of voters are White, 25 percent Latino, 17 percent Black and 8 percent Asian, it is important that these same ratios are reflected in who gets interviewed. Because there are not enough resources to set up exit polling stations at all 1,700 precincts in Los Angeles, pollsters must select a sample of about 50 to 60 precincts, while also keeping the demographics of the city in mind. The easiest way to do this would be to pick precincts that most closely resemble the overall demographics of the city. For example, voting precinct # 9007129, situated in North Hollywood, has a population that is 49 percent White, 24 percent Latino, 15 percent Black and 7 percent Asian – almost a microcosm of the entire City of Los Angeles. Or is it?

The reality is that the great majority of voters do not live such racially integrated neighborhoods. Instead, most voters reside – and vote – in precincts that are racially homogenous. Thus, the White, Latino, Black or Asian voters in that North Hollywood precinct may not be representative of the “typical” White, Latino, Black or Asian voter in Los Angeles. According to an analysis of geographic segregation by the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, Los Angeles racial groups are still very much divided (Farley 2001, see also Logan 2002).

Do Latinos who vote at the 28th Street YMCA in East Los Angeles, and has a population that is 95 percent Latino, differ than Latinos who voted at the precinct in North Hollywood? And what if those Latinos at the 28th Street YMCA are excluded from the exit poll? Similarly, questions may arise about Asian Americans who vote at the Korean Resource Center (61 percent Asian population) and Blacks who vote at the Crenshaw United Methodist Church (88 percent Black population).

Is the precinct that looks like a microcosm of the city, *really* a *microcosm* of the city, or is it an anomaly? Thus, a more accurate representation of racial and ethnic voters, and therefore the city at large, would be to conduct exit poll interviews in high concentration racial precincts (perhaps the ones referenced above).

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In an effort to address the exit poll controversy, researchers at the Center for the Study of Los Angeles, at Loyola Marymount University designed an alternative exit poll methodology. The new method, described as a “stratified homogenous precinct experiment,” seeks to interview voters in predominantly racially concentrated neighborhoods, and then weight the final results with respect to each racial and ethnic group as necessary. A critical component to this exercise is the recruitment and training of student exit poll interviewers. Participating students will receive class credit and a \$80 stipend plus mileage for their participation in the project. Given the current problems surrounding the 2004 exit poll, this project is also an opportunity for students to make a visible and meaningful impact on the future of exit polling in American elections. If the

results of the study reveal more accurate results, student participants will be credited as the key to breaking new ground in political science methodology.

In order for the CSLA exit poll project to be accurate, it must be implemented in a rigorous and scientific manner. CSLA researchers will identify 40 precincts to be included in the exit poll survey, and two students will be assigned to each precinct to carry out the interviews. The interviews will be self-administered, meaning that voters will fill out a quick survey card on their own, while the students will concentrate on recruiting voters to participate as they leave the voting precinct. In total, 80 student exit pollsters will be needed to carry out the project on March 8, 2005.

For the results to reflect all voters in the city, the exit polling will be conducted from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm, the entire time that the polls are open. It is important that exit polling is conducted from open to close, since many voters stop at the polls before they go to work, at their lunch break, or on their way home. Exit polls conducted from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm have been found to be inaccurate (see Busch and Lieske, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1985). Thus, it is a full day commitment on the part of the students; however, you will receive \$80 upon completion of the project, in addition to credit for a class research project and opportunity to list this research experience on your resume. Prior to the March 8, 2005 election, student participants will receive additional training on the exit poll project, and a final question and answer session will be conducted on election eve, Monday, March 7, 2005.

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