

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**NATIONAL COUNCIL ON PUBLIC POLLS
POLLING REVIEW BOARD
THE 2004 ELECTION POLLS**

Pre-election polls have become a staple for news reporting of elections. What started in the first half of the twentieth century by a few polling organizations has become a major enterprise for many. While we strongly believe a poll's performance should be based on its overall reporting about the issues and dynamics of a political campaign, we also believe reporting on the public's perception and preference for each of the candidates is important. We can only assess voters' preferences for candidates at the end of the campaign, which is what this review is about. We assess their performance in the so-called *horse race* in order to get a better perspective on their credibility for future elections. We cannot evaluate the polls during the course of the campaign as there is no standard against which to evaluate them. Nor can we objectively measure a poll's contribution to the understanding of issues and campaign dynamics. We do that subjectively.

CANDIDATE PREFERENCE POLLS

The 16 national presidential polls conducted in 2004 for the media had a very good year. The average candidate error was less than one percentage point (0.9%). Only two polls missed the final vote for either John Kerry or George W. Bush by more than two percentage points. Eleven polls had Bush ahead in his narrow win over Kerry. Four polls had Kerry ahead and one had it even. Four of the five were within sampling error. The other, is an Internet poll for which error due to sampling cannot be calculated.

This year NCPP included polls in its analysis that used a variety of polling methods. What are called traditional polls had an interviewer call a random sample of respondents by telephone and ask questions. Other polls were conducted using Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and the Internet. For IVR polls a computer placed the call and a recorded voice asked questions. Responses were given on the numeric key pad on the telephone. The Internet polls reported here interview respondents who are members of their panels. Those panels have people that volunteered to be members of the panels. They were not randomly selected. Also included in this analysis were polls done by partisan pollsters using traditional polling methods.

NCPP reports on the polls using these various methodologies because their results are widely available to the public. Their inclusion in this analysis is not an endorsement.

There were a total of 198 state polls. 131 were traditional state polls and 67 used other methods. They polled races for President, Senator or Governor. Most or all of the field work for the polls included in this analysis were completed between October 26 and Election Day, November 2nd. The results of almost all polls were verified with two published sources. A few had only one source.

Of the 198 polls, 165 were conducted by only 11 organizations. Each worked in three or more states. The organization doing the greatest number of traditional polls was Mason-Dixon. It polled in 25 states. Survey USA, one of two firms using Interactive Voice Response (IVR), did 49 state polls. Two firms did Internet polling in three or more states, and only one partisan firm, Strategic Vision, which usually poll for Republicans, worked in more than three states. Only 33 polls were conducted by organizations that worked in only one or two states. These organizations collectively had an average error of 1.5% on a candidate placing them on the lower end of the error scale. Only 4 of these 33 polls had the wrong candidate leading.

State Polls: 11 Organizations Working in 3 or More States

Organization	Number of Polls	Error on Candidate	Races with Wrong Winner
Mason-Dixon	25	1.4%	1
Rasmussen*	8	1.4%	0
Survey USA*	49	1.5%	1
Strategic Vision (R) ***	15	1.7%	3
American Research Group	8	1.8%	3
Research 2000	11	1.9%	1
FOX News	7	2.1%	2
Quinnipiac	5	2.1%	0
Zogby	20	2.2%	2
CNN/USA Today/Gallup	7	2.6%	4
The Harris Poll**	3	2.7%	2
Zogby/WSJ**	7	3.1%	0

Unless noted, survey conducted by telephone

* Survey conducted by Interactive Voice Response

** Survey conducted over Internet

*** Partisan polls

POLLING ERROR

On occasion, some state polls had the losing candidate ahead. This occurred 11% of the time. Most of these races, however, were within their margin of error. Had one paid attention to the sampling error when reaching a conclusion about the likely winner most mistaken projections could have been avoided. In only one-fourth of the races with the incorrect leader was the error in the poll greater than its margin of error. In other polls, even when the correct conclusion about the winner is reached, the potential for error exists when the victory margin in the poll for the winning candidate is smaller than two times the sampling error (a 95% confidence interval). An additional 2% of the polls had this problem.

The average error for all 198 state polls was 1.7% on a candidate. The organizations doing traditional polls, IVR polls and the lone partisan pollster had comparable candidate errors. The polls done on the Internet had the largest errors.

	Average Error on a Candidate
Traditional	1.8%
IVR	1.5%
Internet	2.9%
Partisan	1.7%
Overall	1.7%

A few races stood out as problem races. These races may have continued changing right up to the election. It is not likely that all polls could be off the mark, although this is a possibility in a close race. These are the races in the battleground states with more than two polls showing the losing candidate ahead: Florida P – 5, Florida S – 3, Iowa P – 3, Minnesota P – 2, Ohio P – 2. The other 7 errors in the outcome were all in different races.

We also looked at the error due to sampling for Traditional, IVR and Partisan polls and compared it to the candidate error. We did not include Internet polls in this analysis as the sampling error can only be computed for probability samples. Internet polls in this analysis are not probability samples.*

* News stories refer to the Margin of Error. In statistical terms the Margin of Error is a 95% confidence interval. That interval is formed by taking two times the statistical sampling error around a candidate percentage. For example, if a candidate gets 52% in a probability based poll and the sampling error is 2 percentage points, a confidence interval would be 2 times 2% added and subtracted from 52%, or a confidence interval of 48% to 56%. The term, Margin of Error, as used by news reports, would be 2 times 2% or 4%. Sampling error or Margin of Error does not reflect other errors in a poll that may be due to multiple causes. Most of these other errors cannot readily be measured. The error due to sampling can be measured and is an important indicator of the potential variation of the results due to sampling.

In 13 of the 188 non-Internet polls (7%) the candidate error was larger than the statistical sampling error on a candidate. For the other 93% the candidate error did not exceed the error due to sampling. The sampling error should be taken into account when interpreting a poll. The lesson here is that one should only conclude that a poll is pointing to a likely election winner when the lead of one candidate over another is greater than the combined sampling error on each of them. Even this is not infallible, but it greatly improves the chances of a correct interpretation of the outcome of an election.

We wanted to see if there was any relationship between the size of the winning margin in the election and the size of the error in the poll. There is no relationship. Elections won by small margins had errors that were just as large as those won by wide margins, and vice versa.

ERROR COMPUTATION

Candidate error reported here is half the error on the difference between the top two candidates. For example, if a race was won by 55% to 45% the difference is 10 percentage points. If a poll reported a lead of only 47% to 43% with 10% undecided, the 4-point lead in the poll as compared to the 10-point victory would be off by 6 percentage points. The candidate error in this case was counted as half of 6 for each candidate resulting in a 3 point candidate error for the poll.

No method of judging the error works perfectly. This approach to counting the error was used in order to avoid an arbitrary decision about how to allocate the 10% undecided. When the pollsters reported some percentage as undecided, he or she left it up to those using the poll to make their own interpretation of the outcome. Under the circumstances we decided to make no interpretation about the undecided and to judge the poll by the margin between the two leading candidates. Other evaluations of poll performance based on other methods may produce different conclusions. Other necessary components of good polling including rigorous methodology and a commitment to measure the full range of broader election issues and voter concerns are not part of this evaluation.

Most percentages reported for polls were whole numbers. For the few that had decimals we rounded them to whole numbers. The difference between the top two candidates in each election also was rounded to two digits before polling errors were computed.

For more information about this and other polling issues, contact the NCPP Polling Review Board Members.

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