NATIONAL COUNCIL ON PUBLIC POLLS
POLLING REVIEW BOARD
ANALYSIS OF THE 2006 ELECTION POLLS

This report contains a review of the 152 Governor and U.S. Senate polls reported by the media in the last week preceding the 2006 mid-term elections. Pre-election polls have become a mainstay in election reporting and forecasting and, as such, need to be evaluated in order to be deemed a reliable source. This report concludes that pre-election polls have earned a solid record as valuable predictors of election outcomes. Having said that, while polls do contain more than just horse race results it is only the election outcomes that can be measured in terms of external validity. Because we can test these measures, we do. However, we also want to point to the importance of subjectively measuring poll performance on general reporting on the salience of particular issues, the tone and dynamics of campaigns, and a variety of other content that can be explored using surveys as a tool to measure voter preferences and behavior. Since there is no external criterion to test these results, here we assess what can be measured: how well the polls did in predicting actual vote count results. We find the polls did quite well. Accuracy of the polls has been a subject of dispute in the press, and this report and comprehensive analysis intends to inform the debate.

This analysis includes polls that were administered using three modes: traditional telephone calling, interactive voice response (IVR), and Internet samples and panels. Telephone and IVR polls are probability samples. We looked at the margin of error (error due to sampling) for each poll and compared it with the candidate error. In 12 of the 108 probability polls, 11%, the candidate error was larger than the statistical margin of error on the candidate. For the other 89% of the polls the candidate error did not exceed the margin of error. The margin of error should be taken into account when interpreting a poll. (Note: The margin of error is for each candidate; therefore the error on the margin is double the margin of error on a candidate.) The lesson here is that one should only conclude that a poll is pointing to an election winner when the lead exceeds two times the margin of error. Even this is not infallible.

We computed candidate error as half the error on the margin between the two leading candidates. For example, in the gubernatorial election in Georgia, the incumbent candidate Sonny Perdue received 58% of the vote in contrast to his opponent Mark Taylor who received 38%. The difference between these top two candidates was 20 percentage points. In the Strategic Vision Poll, Perdue garnered 51% to Taylor's 38%, a margin of 13 percentage points between these two top contenders. Compared to the actual vote difference of 20 percentage points, this poll was 7 percentage points off. The candidate error in this Strategic Vision poll was counted as 3.5 points, half the error on the margin.

There is no perfect method for judging poll and candidate error. Our decision to choose this approach was guided by a desire to avoid an arbitrary method of allocating undecided voters. In all 152 polls the pollsters reported some percentage as undecided, leaving up to those using the poll to make their own interpretation of the outcome. This

method of computing candidate error makes no interpretation of the percent of undecided reported, no assumptions on allocation of the undecided, and evaluates the poll only by the difference between the top two candidates.

Using this method, the average candidate error for the 152 pre-election polls in 2006 was 2 percentage points. Nearly half of these polls had a candidate error of less than 2 percentage points, and most had an error of less than 4 points. Only 9 of the polls had an error of 5 points or more and only 7 had the wrong winner.

There were 80 U.S. Senate race polls, with an average candidate error of 1.9 percentage points. A majority of these Senate polls had a candidate error of less than 2 points and most had an error of less than 5 points. The 72 polls on gubernatorial races had an average error of 2.2 and most had a error of less than 5 points.

2006	Number Of Polls	Average Error on Candidate	% with Candidate Error < 2%	% with Candidate Error < 5%	Races With Wrong Winner
All polls	152	2.0%	49%	94%	7
Senate polls	80	1.9%	56%	95%	3
Governor polls	72	2.2%	42%	93%	4

Track Record	Number Of Polls	Average Error on Candidate
2006 Gov and Sen	152	2.0%
2004 Pres	16	0.9%
2002 Gov and Sen	159	2.4%
2000 Pres	10	1.1%

For more information about this and other polling issues, contact the NCPP Polling Review Board Members. For more information about NCPP, visit our web site or contact us at info@ncpp.org.

HOW POLLING ERRORS WERE COMPUTED

1. This analysis is based on 152 publicly released polls which were either sponsored by media organizations or conducted by academic institutions. The Polling Report, Pollster.com, and RealClearPolitics.com were used as sources as a check for consistency, to confirm accuracy, and to obtain as complete a list as possible. Some polls were verified in the publication that carried them.

2. Only final polls of likely voters covering races for Governor and U.S. Senate were included. The last poll that appeared was considered final.

3. Timeliness was an issue. Our standard was that all or most of the interviewing was completed no earlier than November 1st.

4. The candidate error reported here is half the error on the margin between the top two candidates. The error was calculated by subtracting the margin between the top two candidates in a poll from the margin between the same candidates in the election.

5. 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.

6. Many states with elections for Governor or U.S. Senate did not have polls meeting the criteria of public release or timeliness.