

NCPP Analysis **Of** **Final Statewide Pre-Election Polls** **2010**

Since 1997, the National Council on Public Polls has published analyses of how closely national polls that were published or broadcasted matched the final official election returns in the race for President. Analyses of state polls on the races for U.S. Senate and governor were added in 2002.

These analyses have sparked controversy inside and outside of the polling profession. And such analyses are now done by a wide variety of those interested in survey research, from university professors to bloggers.

We strongly believe a poll's performance should be based on its overall reporting about the issues and the dynamics of a political campaign, and not one number. We also believe reporting on the public's perception and preference for each of the candidates is important. We can only match the polls to voters' actual votes for the candidates at the end of the campaign, which is the topic of this review.

For the 2010 elections, NCPP now provides this analysis of how state-level polls matched the returns in the statewide races for U.S. Senate and governor. NCPP expresses its thanks to Mark Blumenthal of HuffingtonPost.com for providing much of the state poll data analyzed here.

State Polls

This analysis covers 295 state-level polls with all interviewing conducted October 13, 2010, or later (the 20 days leading up to Election Day). In past NCPP analyses, only polls mostly conducted in roughly the week before the election were included, using the assumption that the polls conducted closer to Election Day are more likely to reflect the final results than polls conducted before that time. Using this same criteria for 2010, there were 202 polls with at least some interviewing conducted Monday, October 24, 2010 or later. Using this cut-off does not imply any judgment about the quality or validity of the surveys. It simply matches past practice.

As in the past, in states with both a U.S. Senate and a governor's race, a poll usually provides results on both races. In that case, the single poll is counted as two polls, once as a Senate poll and once as a gubernatorial poll.

In 2010, some pollsters conducted and released more than one survey in the time period covered by this analysis. In such cases, only the last poll in a state by the pollster is included in the analysis, in keeping with past practice.

As was the case in 2008, NCPP uses its traditional Candidate Error analysis for the state polls, a computation of how far the poll's estimate of the percentage-point difference between the two candidates is off from the actual percentage difference in the vote percentages for each candidate. The initial figure is then divided in half to give an estimate that can be applied to each candidate's percentage.

Average Candidate Error for the 295 polls in 2010 was 2.4 percentage points overall. For polls with interviews conducted Oct. 24 or later, the average error is 2.1 percentage points. In 2008, the average error for the final state surveys was 1.8 percentage points.

The 295 state polls were distributed as follows: telephone polls using only human interviewers, 137 (46%); IVR polls 122 (41%); Internet 27 (9%); polls using a combination of IVR and human interviewers, 7 (2%) and two mail polls.

For telephone surveys using live interviewers, the average error was 2.4 percentage points. It was 2.6 percentage points for IVR, and 1.7 percentage points for Internet. There were a large number of different polling firms which conducted state polls, while most of the state-level IVR polls were conducted by SurveyUSA, Rasmussen (or its spin-off Pulse Opinion Research) and Public Policy Polling. YouGov was the pollster for the Internet polls in this analysis

A total of 69 of the state polls (23%) had results that fell outside of the sampling margin of error for that survey. A total of 51 of the state polls conducted on or after Oct. 25, 2010, (25%) had results outside the margin of error.

Here is a table summarizing the NCPP calculations from 2002 to 2010 on the state polls.

State Polls: Candidate Error 2002-2010				
<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of polls</u>	<u>Interview start dates</u>	<u>Election Day</u>	<u>Candidate Error</u>
2002				
	98	10/29/02	11/5/02	2.3%
	159	10/20/02		2.4%
2004				
	198	10/25/04	11/2/04	1.7%
	56	10/17-10/25/04		2.2%
2006				
	152	11/1/06 (End date)	11/7/06	2.0%
2008				
	236	10/27/08	11/4/08	1.8%
	507	10/15/08		2.0%
2010				
	202	10/24/10	11/2/10	2.1%
	295	10/13/10		2.4%

The NCPP analysis includes polls using a variety of polling methods. An individual poll can use a combination of methodologies.

- **Live Interviewer Polls:** In what were once called traditional telephone polls, a random sample of telephone numbers is dialed and a human interviewer reads the questions to the respondent and records the answers.
- **Interactive Voice Response (IVR):** In a pure IVR poll, a random sample of telephone numbers is dialed by computer and a recorded voice asks questions. Respondents enter their answers using the numeric key pad on their telephone.
 - In a mixed mode IVR survey, human interviewers either conduct some portion of the interview or some percentage of the total interviews, with the IVR process completing the remainder of the interview process or the other portion of the interviews.
- **Internet polls:** Internet polls included in this analysis are based on panels of people who have been recruited into an internet panel. A panel member is invited via email to participate in the survey. The panel member logs onto the survey website and completes

the survey online. The recruitment of panel members and the selection of the panel members for a survey may or may not be random.

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.

For the polls conducted via calls to telephone numbers, there are several possible types of sample designs:

- Landline only: Telephone numbers were drawn only from residential landline telephone numbers.
- Landline/Cell Phone: In addition to landline telephone numbers, calls were made to cell phones and interviews completed with those on cell phones.
- Landline/Cell Phone Only: In addition to landline telephone numbers, calls were made to cell phones and interviews were completed only with those who have a cell phone and have no landline telephone at home.
- RBS: Samples are drawn from registered voter databases and calls made to telephone numbers from those databases or numbers that have been matched to the database. These numbers can include both landline and cell phone numbers.

Based on the information available on the 2010 final state polls, the average candidate errors were:

- Landline only (252 polls): 2.5 percentage points.
- Landline and cell (8 polls): 2.8 percentage points.
- RBS (6 polls): 2.8 percentage points.

Computations

Candidate error reported here is one-half the error of the difference between the top two candidates. For example, if Sam Jones won the race by 55% to 45% over Joan Smith, Jones' margin is 10 percentage points. If a poll reported Jones leading 47% to 43%, a 4-percentage-point margin, the poll would be off by 6 percentage points, 10 points minus 4 points.

The candidate error is half of the 6 points, that is, a 3-point error for each candidate. This is because if 3 points were added to the poll estimate for Jones and 3 points subtracted from Smith, the difference would be 10 percentage points: the election margin. This error can be compared with the sampling margin of error for the poll. This is the method adopted by NCPP in 1997.

Another issue is the inclusion of final estimates from pollsters who decide, using various criteria, to allocate the undecided respondents in their final poll to one candidate or another. Such allocation is common practice by some pollsters, but is criticized by others. And some pollsters who allocate undecideds publish the numbers with allocations and without allocation, but some do not. For the polls reported for 2010, it does not appear that any pollster allocated the undecided voters.

No method of judging the error works perfectly. 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, the results were rounded to whole numbers.