

## **NCPP Analysis of Final Presidential Pre-Election Polls, 2008**

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 state poll performance 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 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 assess voters' actual preferences for candidates at the end of the campaign, which is the topic of this review.

For the 2008 elections, NCPP now provides this analysis of how the final national polls matched the election returns in the race for the White House, as well as an analysis of how state-level polls matched the presidential returns in that state and the returns in the statewide races for U.S. Senate and governor. Vote totals are not certified and final in all states. When all states certified their election returns, those numbers will be reflected in this analysis. NCPP expresses its thanks to Mark Blumenthal of Pollster.com for providing much of the state poll data analyzed here.

### **National Polls**

We present two ways to match the national polls with the national election returns.

- **Candidate Error:** This is the traditional NCPP 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.
- **Total Error:** This computation compares the difference between each candidate's percentage in the poll and that same candidate's percentage of the actual vote.

The 19 national presidential polls conducted in 2008 and published at the end of the campaign came very close to the election outcome.

In terms of Candidate Error, the average is less than one percentage point (0.9), whether the pollster choose to allocate undecided voters at the end of not. That is the same as the 0.9 percentage point error reported by NCPP for this analysis in 2004. It is slightly less than the 1.1 percentage point average in 2000. In 2008, estimated errors ranged from 0.1 to 2.4 percentage points.

Thus, despite widely discussed concerns such as the growing size of the cell-phone-only population (and this year the possibility of a repeat of Bradley/Wilder effect), there was no change in poll average error.

In terms of Total Error, the error by poll varied from 0 to 6 percentage points. *(The actual computations produced numbers from 0.2 percentage point to 5.8 percentage points. However, since the poll results are correctly reported only to the full percentage point, the error is as well. The actual vote is correctly computed to the hundredths of a percentage point.)* The final poll estimates for Barack Obama varied from 50% to 55%, with the preliminary actual vote percentage now at 52.78%. For John McCain, the poll estimates varied from 42% to 48%, with his preliminary final vote percentage at 45.97%.

Every national poll showed Obama in the lead, although at least two polls had Obama's lead as less than the sampling margin of error for the poll. And five polls showed an Obama lead of less than twice the poll's sampling error. *(While sampling error applies to each figure in a random survey, the margin of error for the difference between two percentages is somewhat less than twice the margin of error on each number. Thus, using two times the margin of error is a conservative standard.)* The average of Obama's leads in the polls was 7.5 percentage points, compared to the actual of 6.8 percentage point lead in the preliminary vote. The poll margins between the candidates varied from two percentage points to 11 percentage points.

## **State Polls**

This analysis covers 507 state-level polls conducted after October 15, 2008. 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 2008, there were 236 polls with a majority of the interviewing conducted after Monday, October 27, 2008.

Using the Oct. 27 cut-off, many well-known polls are not included: all 84 Polimetrix polls, all polls conducted by Allstate/National Journal, many polls by Politico/Insider Advantage, all polls by AP/GfK, all CNN/Time-ORC, all Big Ten Polls (Franklin and Goldstein), all Marist College polls, two by LA Times-Bloomberg and one Chicago Tribune poll. Using this cut-off does not imply any judgment about the quality or validity of the surveys. It simply matched past practice.

For the analysis of state polls, only the Candidate Error analysis was conducted, to keep the presentation of information as simple as possible with such a large number of polls. Average error for the 507 polls was 2.0 percentage points overall. For polls with most interviews conducted after Oct. 27, the average error is 1.8 percentage points. In 2004, the average error for the final state surveys was 1.7 percentage points.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, much more campaign attention was paid to battleground states than to states where one campaign or the other believed they would win easily. Battleground states were also more likely to be covered by a variety of polls than non-battleground states. State-level surveys in the battleground states showed an average error of 1.6 percentage points, slightly better than all the states.

The 507 state polls were distributed as follows: telephone polls using live interviewers, 270 (53.3%); IVR Polls 143 (28.2%); Internet 93 (18.3%); and one *Columbus Dispatch* mail poll. For telephone surveys using live interviewers, the average error was 2.0 percentage points. It was 1.8 percentage points for IVR, and 2.5 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 Public Policy Polling. YouGov/Polimetrix conducted the majority of Internet polls.

A total of 53 of the state polls or 12.8 percent had results that fell outside of the sampling margin of error for that survey.

Here is a table summarizing the NCPP calculations from 2002 to 2008 on the state polls.

<b>State Polls: Candidate Error 2002-2008</b>				
<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of polls</u>	<u>Interview start dates</u>	<u>Election Day</u>	<u>Candidate Error</u>
<b>2002</b>				
	<b>98</b>	10/29/02	5-Nov-02	<b>2.3%</b>
	<b>159</b>	10/20/02		2.4%
<b>2004</b>				
	<b>198</b>	10/25/04	2-Nov-04	<b>1.7%</b>
			<i>Phone</i>	1.8%
			<i>IVR</i>	1.5%
			<i>Internet</i>	2.9%
	<b>56</b>	10/17-10/25/04		2.2%
<b>2006</b>				
	<b>152</b>	11/1/06 (End date)	7-Nov-06	<b>2.0%</b>
<b>2008</b>				
	<b>236</b>	10/27/08	4-Nov-08	<b>1.8%</b>
	<b>507</b>	10/15/08		<b>2.0%</b>

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.

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.

## **Computations**

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 the 6 points for each candidate, resulting in a 3 point candidate error.

Critics of this calculation note that focusing on the margin between candidates doesn't take into account a poll's level of undecided respondents. The total error method addresses this by assessing how close a poll came to each candidate's actual support. For example, if a race was won by 55% to 45%, and a final poll's estimate was 47% to 43%, that is an error of 8 points on the first candidate (55 minus 47) and 2 points on the second (45 minus 43), for a total error of 10 points.

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.

This analysis uses the numbers, whether allocated or unallocated, the pollster labeled as their final numbers.

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.