Discussion of Public Opinion Polls in the News

Clyde Tucker

AIR and CNN

Americans love a good game, especially when it's close.

But, what if it's not close, like Johnson-Goldwater or Nixon-McGovern.

The horserace may still have news value but not much entertainment value.

So what would the pollsters and the media do then?

Some General Observations

- Horserace numbers don't tell a story, so national polls are still necessary.

- The role of state polls will continue to grow because of the focus on battleground states and calling the electoral college.

- The segmentation of the electorate is accentuated by proliferation of alternative news outlets.

General Observations Continued

- Given the low response rates in all the polls, representativeness becomes the real issue.

- We still have a need for large national in-person surveys like the CPS and ACS for weighting.

	MoE	Obama	Romney	Spread
Final Result		50.9	47.3	+3.6 D
RCP Average 10/31-11/5		48.8	48.1	+0.7 D
Politico/GWU	3.1	47	47	Tie
Rasmussen	3.0	48	49	+1.0 R
IBD/TIPP	3.7	50	49	+1.0 D
CNN/OR	3.5	49	49	Tie
Gallup	2.0	49	50	+1.0 R
ABC/Wash. Post	2.5	50	47	+3.0 D
Monmouth/Braun	2.6	48	48	Tie
NBC/Wall St J	2.6	48	47	+1.0 D
Pew Research	2.2	50	47	+3.0 D

State	RCP Average		Spread	Final Result		Spread
	Obama	Romney		Obama	Romney	
OH	50.0	47.1	+2.9 D	50.7	47.7	+3.0 D
FL	48.2	49.7	+1.5 R	50.0	49.1	+0.9 D
VA	48.0	47.7	+0.3 D	51.2	47.3	+3.9 D
NH	49.9	47.9	+2.0 D	52.0	46.4	+5.6 D
NC	46.2	49.2	+3.0 R	48.4	50.4	+2.0 R
MI	49.5	45.5	+4.0 D	54.2	44.7	+9.5 D
WI	50.4	46.2	+4.2 D	52.8	45.9	+6.9 D
PA	49.4	45.6	+3.8 D	52.0	46.6	+5.4 D
IA	48.7	46.3	+2.4 D	52.0	46.2	+5.8 D
CO	48.8	47.3	+1.5 D	51.9	46.1	+5.8 D
NV	50.2	47.4	+2.8 D	52.4	45.7	+6.7 D

Conclusions

- Given many polls were off in the same direction, there may be a common problem

- Missing likely voters on the Democratic side

- They are more likely to be the young

- What to do about it

The Rocky Road to Estimating the Horserace

- Cell-phone only households and dual-frame design
- Increasing nonresponse affecting representativeness (especially the young)
- Identifying likely voters
- Allocating undecideds
- House effects (political bias, mode, funding, methodological sophistication)
- Time constraints
- Weighting without a real frame

Determining Likely Voters

- Likely voter screens are usually based on answers to a series of questions, including political interest, past voting history, length of time in the community, and likelihood of voting

- The likely voter screen is used either to exclude respondents with a low score or to assign a probability of voting to each respondent, often aided by information from voter validation studies.

- But, what is the result?

A Prescription

- Registered voter numbers should exhibit less variance than likely voter numbers
- Begin with a baseline for both registered voters and likely voters shortly before the conventions
- Track both series up until election day
- Examine the variance of the likely voter series, determining which screener questions contribute most to the variance
- Carry out this exercise every election

The Tyranny of the Horserace in Survey Research

- The importance of the horserace
  - Very important behavior--the best known product of survey research (unemployment rate or presidential approval probably next)
  - A gold standard is available

- The problem with the horserace
  - Binary choice
  - Only once every four years
  - Just one of many measures
  - Constrained distribution
    - More than 40% can be initially assigned to each party
    - In poll with 1000 respondents, margin of error (+/- 3%) covers a good part of the remaining difference between the candidates
    - Castigated if off by 3 or 4 points, especially if the wrong winner