A POST-ELECTION BANDWAGON EFFECT? COMPARING NATIONAL EXIT POLL DATA WITH A GENERAL POPULATION SURVEY

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Background

A great deal of attention has traditionally been given to the accuracy of pre-election "horse race" polls. This attention was particularly evident in the Presidential election of 1992. These polls featured sudden shifts in voting preference as the election approached, and variations in methodology which affected the computation of preference percentages. (1)

Attention has also been given, historically, to the alleged "bandwagon effect" of polls, whereby undecided voters may decide to vote for a particular candidate on the basis of his or her lead in the polls, thus providing the voter with a sense of being affiliated with a winner.

This project provides an opportunity to examine these issues from a post-election perspective. The presentation compares results of the Voter Research and Surveys National Exit Poll (n = 15,236) with a standard national omnibus telephone survey (n = 1,859) conducted shortly after the election, in early December of 1992.(2)

Comparison of Aggregate Survey Results

The VRS experienced a significant but not altogether unusual incompletion rate (refusals, inability to make full contact, etc.) of about 40% to 45%. Moreover, response bias created a refusal rate which varied by subgroup. For instance, it was more pronounced among older persons. (3) Nonetheless, the weighted VRS poll results were identical to those of the actual vote total (Clinton, 43%; Bush, 38%; Perot, 19%).

Data from the ICR omnibus poll reflected good but not extraordinary response rates. One rule of thumb in telephone survey work states that a response rate, as defined by contact rate x cooperation rate x completion rate, will rarely if ever exceed 50% (4). By this definition, the ICR survey generated a response rate of 50%, at the high end of the reasonably expected response rates.(5) Cooperation and completion rates were about 80%, actually higher than those reported by VRS.

The national omnibus poll results differed somewhat from the VRS data, however. While the Perot percentage was within the margin of error (20%), the percentage for Clinton was higher (49%) and the percentage for Bush lower (32%) than were either the actual vote totals or the results from the VRS survey. (6) The magnitude of the differences suggests it is unlikely that the variation was due to sampling error alone (see table one).

Methodological differences in the two surveys may also contribute to the variation. While the VRS survey used actual voters as the sampling frame, the national telephone survey used the general adult population. Seventy two percent of the respondents said they voted for one of the three major candidates. This ratio is considerably higher than the actual turnout ratio of 56% (or 55%, according to the estimate of Curtis B. Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate) of the 18+ population. (7)

Response error tied to over estimation of voting is one of the oldest and most persistent types of response error to be documented. Even official government data is plagued with this problem. In 1988, the Census Bureau estimated the turnout in the last Presidential election at 57%, which was in fact 7% higher than the actual total of 50% (8).

Presser (1990) reports that such response errors tend to range between 12% and 16%. He also reports that attempts to reduce response bias by altering item context have been unsuccessful. His study did find that such error was time-related, however, with the error tending to be larger the closer a survey was to an election (9).

He also found (1984) that such inaccuracy tended to be respondent-specific rather than item-specific. This pattern varies from that associated with general survey items, in which response bias tends to vary from item

to item, and not fall into respondent-based patterns.(10)

Silver, Abramson, and Anderson (1986) found a simiar response pattern, this time regardless of response setting. They conclude that the stubbornness of over estimation of voting is evidence of the "salience of the civic norm of voting."

They cite as further evidence of this norm data from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center Voter Validation Studies of 1979 and 1980. Those studies found that expectation of voting was closely tied to response bias. Those who said they expected to vote but did not were far more likely to say they voted in a survey than those who had no intention of voting all along.(11)

Petrocik (1991) reports only a moderate correlation between survey response items used as predictors of turnout and actual validated voter turnout. (12)

The ICR data also provide specific information regarding the failure to provide a candidate preference response. A little less than a fifth (17.5%) of the respondents say they did not vote. Subgroup analysis finds variation for this ratio within subgroups to be consistent with that usually noted in the general population (i.e., lower turnout among lower SES persons, younger persons and females). In addition, 10% refused to provide a response, in the tradition of the "secret ballot." This type of refusal was especially typical among older respondents. Finally, one-half of one percent said they did not know for whom they voted.

Distribution of Response Error
The complexity of the results derive from the fact that while obviously some voters say they voted when they actually did not, that lack of response validity is not distributed randomly with regard to candidate choice, nor is it distributed uniformly based on actual voter behavior. Had the former been the case, the random nature of the distribution would have increased sample totals for Perot while decreasing them slightly for Bush and substantially for Clinton. Had the latter been the case, the vote proportions in the ICR sample and the actual vote would have been roughly equal.

Rather, a disproportionate number of persons who either did not vote or perhaps voted for Bush claim to have voted, and to have voted for the winner, Bill Clinton.

Subgroup analysis enhances the concept of the complexity of this type of response error. Not only does response bias seem to occur in the direction of Clinton, but this bias is unevenly distributed within population subgroups. This bias suggests a type of post-election "bandwagon" effect, an effect most common in subgroups predisposed to Clinton.

Subgroups where Clinton ran strongest and where Democrats traditionally do well (ie., women, low income voters, and ethnic minorities) tended to display a greater variation between reported vote and the actual vote as represented by VRS data. This variation was consistently in the direction favorable to Clinton, usually at the expense of Bush, with the reported Perot vote fairly consistent with VRS data.

Voter Preference by Gender
Table two examines voter preference by gender. The gender proportions are roughly equal in the two samples, and closely match population ratios. The ICR data indicate a slightly higher turnout among males, again consistent with previous data.

Much has been written in recent years about the "gender gap" favoring the Democrats among females, and it is here that the most response bias occurs. Among males, the response bias is fairly limited. The differences for the Clinton vote (43% vs. 41%) between the two surveys are within sampling tolerances. Among women, however, there is a large response bias in favor of Clinton. The difference here is nine points (54% in the ICR survey, compared to 45% in the VRS).

Voter Preference and Party Affiliation
Large selective response biases also appear with regard to political affiliation (see table three). Republicans are more strongly represented in the VRS survey than in the ICR study, with Independents the reverse. These data are consistent with previous research indicating a lower level of activity among Independents, who often tend to be cross-pressured or express a lower interest in politics. This trend is also reflected in the percentage of each group expressing a voting preference, a percentage which is significantly lower among the Independents.

Typically, Democrats are considered to have lower turnout than Republicans, but in this survey their turnout ratios are virtually identical. It is also interesting in this context that the biggest variation between the two data sets occurs with regard to the

Clinton vote among Democrats. Whereas the VRS survey has Democrats supporting Clinton by a 77% ratio, ICR respondents who report being Democrats provide Clinton with 85% support, a difference of 8 points. This is the largest differential. The Republican vote as expressed in the two surveys is similar, while the Independent vote shows similar but somewhat weaker trends.

Voter Preference and Income

While no similar trends were evident by either age or education, they also appeared with regard to income, as shown in table four.

The previously established pattern continues. The largest difference between the two surveys occurs with regard to the Clinton preference in the lowest income group. The spread between the ICR and VRS data is 7 percentage points. Once again, the largest differential is found in favor of the Democratic candidate within a relatively Democratic subgroup and also within a relatively low-turnout subgroup.

The relatively low turnout and underlying validity of the ICR data is demonstrated by the increase in the percentage of voters expressing an actual voting preference as income rises, and also by the higher proportion of low-income persons in the ICR survey as compared to the VRS, again reflective of traditionally lower turnout within this subgroup.

Voter Preference and Ethnicity

Table five reports the data by ethnicity, and the response pattern is once again consistent. The biggest difference in the data occurs within the minority subroup, with ICR showing a five point difference in favor of Clinton in this group when compared to the VRS data.

Again the trend is in favor of the Democratic candidate within a relatively Democratic subgroup. The VRS also contains fewer ethnic minorities than does the ICR survey, and the ICR survey reports higher turnout among non-minorities, again consistent with the lower turnouts usually noted within minority populations.

Voter Preference and Region

The income and ethnicity trends combine to also provide a trend by region. In the ICR survey, Clinton generates 51% support in the South, the highest of any region, where in the VRS survey Clinton's greatest support is seen to be in the East, and in no area does

he receive majority support. The data are specified in table six.

The South makes up a smaller proportion of the VRS data compared to the ICR study, again indicative of the lower turnout in that region, no doubt impacted by ethnicity and income. Despite the contention of VRS officials (13) that response rates for them were highest in the Midwestern states and lowest in the East, the weighted data were comparable to the ICR data in these particular regions.

Voter Preference and Marital Status

Again, overall expressed preferences between the two surveys were highly similar, with most falling within sampling tolerances, with the exception of the self-stated Clinton vote among non-marrieds. Here the spread was 6 points in the direction of Clinton in the ICR study.

Recent observations, including VRS exit poll data and other studies, found marital status to be correlated with Presidential preference, with not marrieds tending to lean more toward Clinton and marrieds leaning more toward Bush. Response error occurred once again in a manner consistent with this pattern, as indicated in table seven.

Discussion

The data are consistent with later survey data indicating a significantly higher post-election evaluation of Clinton by the electorate, coupled with more positive indicators, such as rising economic confidence levels and more favorable national mood indicies (ie., more people feeling that things were moving in the "right direction" rather than being on the "wrong track").

The data are also consistent with both dissonance theory and projective behavior. Those individuals who may be more favorably predisposed to a particular candidate may, especially when that candidate appears to be placed in a positive context, be more inclined to say they voted for that candidate when in fact they did not vote or voted for a different candidate.

In addition to shedding some light on survey responses in general, the findings are useful in their indication of the nature of this particular type of response error. This error (over estimation of voting) has been widely recognized for a long time, and has proven to be resistant to efforts to reduce it. This study reveals, however, that this error does not appear to be random or reflective of overall voting paterns. Rather, it is unequally

distributed within subpopulations. Such factors as seasonality, political affinity of the sub-group, and the relative positioning of the candidates all may play a role in determining the nature and extent of that response error within these various subgroups.

The findings vary from those of the SRC's voter validation studies. Those studies concluded that over reporting of voting was not linked to social background, other than race or general political attitude. It can be inferred from these findings that such over reporting is more variable by subgroup. (14)

Another observation made in the exit poll post mortems was that Bush supporters were less cooperative with pollsters, or perhaps more motivated voters were likely to respond. (15) This data tends to counter that hypothesis. It is more supportive of the observations of the director of the ABC News exit poll, who found the presence of such response error to be highly selective(16), thus complicating any analysis or projections to be derived from such data.

On a more positive note, it is interesting to note the fairly high degree of accuracy generated on such a complex and important question with a comparatively inexpensive survey instrument and design such as the omnibus telephone survey method.

Table One
Expressed Voter Preference by Survey

Voter Preference	Actual	VRS (6)	ICR (voter)	ICR (total)
	%	%	%	%
Clinton	43	43	49	35
Bush	38	38	32	23
Perot	19	19	20	14
Total Voters	56		72	72
Did Not Vote				18
Refusal				10
Don't Know				1

Table Two
Expressed Voter Preference by Gender

	Male		Female	
Preference	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%	
Sample	48	47	52	53
Clinton	43	41	54	45
Bush	32	38	31	37
Perot	25	21	15	17
Pct Voters	74		70	

Table Three
Expressed Voter Preference by Party Affiliation

	Affiliation					
	Dem		Rep		Independent	
Preference	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%		%	
Sample	37	38	29	35	33	27
Clinton	85	77	10	10	42	38
Bush	5	10	72	73	25	32
Perot	11	13	19	17	33	30
Pct Voters	80		79		68	

Table Four
Expressed Voter Preference by Income

	Income							
	<$15		$15/$30		$30/$50		$50+	
Pref	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%		%		%	
Sample	22	14	30	24	25	30	15	20
Clinton	65	58	49	45	40	41	36	40
Bush	22	23	31	35	37	38	42	41
Perot	14	19	20	20	22	21	22	18
%Voters	70		75		81		86	

Table Five
Expressed Preference by Ethnicity

	Ethnicity							
	White		Black		Hisp		Others	
Preference	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%		%		%	
Sample	78	87	13	8	6	2	3	2
Clinton	40	39	88	83	68	61	52	44
Bush	38	40	5	10	18	25	20	40
Perot	22	20	7	7	15	14	27	16
Pct Voters	73		80		59		58	

Table Six
Expressed Voter Preference and Region

	Region							
	East		Midwest		South		West	
Preference	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%		%		%	
Sample	21	24	24	27	34	29	21	20
Clinton	49	47	48	42	51	41	47	43
Bush	29	35	35	37	31	43	31	34
Perot	22	18	17	21	18	16	22	23
Pct of Total	70		76		70		72	

Table Seven
Expressed Voter Preference and Marital Status

	Martial Status							
	Married		Single		Widowed		Div/Sep	
Preference	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs	icr	vrs
	%		%		%		%	
Sample	57	66	21	19	10	5	12	9
Clinton	42	40	56	51	60	56	61	49
Bush	37	41	23	30	28	34	20	28
Perot	20	20	21	19	12	11	19	22
Pct Voters	74		70		68		72	

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Footnotes

(1) See, for instance, The Public Perspective, November/December, 1992 and both January/ February and March/April, 1993, whose extensive coverage of these issues was reflective of interest both within and outside the survey research/polling community.

(2) Data were obtained from the ICR-AUS Consultants Excel omnibus survey between December 11 and December 22, 1992. The Excel survey is one of several "omnibus" surveys administered by commercial public opinion firms. In such surveys, clients may purchase items for inclusion on a per question basis. The cient then receives response information for that item at the aggregate level and also crosstabulated across several standard demographic subgroups.

(3) Telephone interview with VRS staff, February, 1993.

(4) Letter from Diane Colasanto, Princeton Survey Research Associates, to Lou Maglavy, DataStat, Inc., May 25, 1990.

(5) Interestingly, the first wave of data collection, from December 11 through the 14th, generated an overall response rate of 54%. The second wave, conducted December 15th through the 22nd, recorded a response rate which dipped to 46% as the Christmas holidays approached and a major snowstorm hit parts of the East.

(6) The data reflect the weighted public release data weighted to the actual election outcome. The Public Perspective, January/February 1993, discusses this weighting procedure in light of the original over estimation of the Clinton vote based on the preliminary raw data.

(7) Federal Election Commission, as reported in the Washington Post, January 19, 1993.

(8)Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C. Current Population Reports, 1989, series p=20, no. 453., and The Washington Post, January 19, 1993.

(9) Stanley Presser, "Can Context Changes Reduce Vote Overreporting?," Public Opinion Quarterly, Winter, 1990.

(10) Stanley Presser, "Is Inaccuracy on Factual Survey Items Item-Specific or Respondent Specific?," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1984.

(11) Brian D. Silver, Paul R. Abramson and Barbara A. Anderson, "The Presence of Others and Overreporting of Voting in American National Elections," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1986.

(12) John R. Petrocik, "An Algorithm for Estimating Turnout as a Guide to Predicting Elections," Public Opinion Quarterly, Winter, 1991.

(13) Interview with Warren Mitofsky in "The Polls and the 1992 Elections: Problems in Exit Polling," The Public Perspective, January/February, 1993.

(14) Petrocick, op. cit.

(15) Mitofsky, op. cit.

(16) Ibid.

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