

Producing a 2008 National Election Voter Scorecard

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Abstract

Typically, in every recent election, we have been inundated with polling results. The focus of these has been on the potential winning candidate and who will or did vote for him or her. Seldom have there been surveys that asked voters about the voting experience, itself. This paper discusses the first national attempt at such a poll. Issues of design are covered, with sampling and especially nonsampling issues given prominence. There have been smaller efforts of this sort in 2004 and 2006, but not a national attempt. Our focus then will be on what in other contexts might be called a national customer satisfaction survey. Key here, of course, is obtaining the interviews before the winners are announced.

Key Words: National Election, RDD, exit polling

Introduction

Newspaper reports of major elections since 2000 suggest that the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 is not working, and that the American public distrusts the election process. Many news reports have focused on the myriad of problems some voters have faced in past elections.

For example, the November 8, 2006 edition of The Washington Post featured an article entitled “Courts Weigh In After Voting Difficulties Emerge at the Polls.” The article describes Election Day problems faced by voters that potentially disenfranchised citizens in a number of states. These problems occurred in a non-presidential election year, when voter turn-out was not as high as it might be in 2008. If the system was stressed under low turnout, it will be stressed again and even more in 2008, unless appropriate system changes are put in place.

Exit polling has focused historically on the “horse race”—on who won or lost—and particularly on the characteristics of those who voted for the winning or losing candidate. Before the 2004 election, exit polls were not used to assess polling problems—certainly not the kinds of problems occurring in Florida in 2000 that led to HAVA.

Naturally, given the controversy created by the Florida vote in 2000, there was an interest in the extent to which voters might see if HAVA was successful. Using an exit poll to partly assess this was judged to be of value. Therefore, in Albuquerque (really Bernalillo County), New Mexico, for the 2004 presidential election an experiment was run to see if exit polls could learn about the quality of the voting process, as seen by the voter. What we found was that it could.

Because the Albuquerque polling was staffed largely by volunteers, mostly from Common Cause, the effort was not expensive. Even so, it was hard to see how the survey we did in Albuquerque could be scaled up to work on a national basis, like the exit polling then run by Edison-Mitofsky. Instead, we felt that a mixture of methods might work. A few county-level exit polls, combined with a very large national telephone survey, seemed more promising.

Because Ohio was so important electorally, to try out this combined option in 2006, we conducted both an exit poll and a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) telephone survey in Franklin County, Ohio (where the city of Columbus is located). While there were differences in the way the questions had to be asked, the results were quite close. In fact, the results were similar enough so that we are developing a full scale national approach for a future election.

This paper describes the results we found in Franklin County and presents our early plans to scale up nationally what we learned—to produce what we call a National Election Voter Scorecard. The National Election Voter Scorecard would be based on a nationwide survey of voters, conducted during a short time period just before and on Election Day. The scorecard would present a broad view of the election process as seen by the voters and provide insights into systematic problems in the election process that might need to be addressed at a national level. A small scale test of the approach was executed in Franklin County and the Washington DC on Election Day 2008.

The rest of this paper describes the pilot test employed in Franklin County and presents results from the survey's assessment of the election process. Then, we more fully describe what we recommend for a future presidential election. A brief summary of preliminary results from our Election Day 2008 test is also provided.

Franklin County Pilot

For the November 2006 election, staff of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC) administered a short telephone questionnaire which took respondents less than 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire first determined whether the respondent or anyone in the household was eligible to vote. If the respondent was a voter, the questionnaire asked whether the person voted in-person or absentee. It then went on to elicit information on any problems the respondent had with voting. Broadly, problems were divided into issues with getting to the point of using the ballot, difficulties using the ballot, as well as general comments on the process.

Problems with getting to the point of using the ballot typically dealt with potential barriers of access to the electoral process. These included whether respondents had difficulty finding the polling location or meeting the identification requirements, were incomed by the length of the wait to vote, or could not be located on the list of registered voters. The section of the questionnaire dealing with difficulties in using the ballot asked respondents whether they had trouble with understanding how to cast their votes and if there was a lack of assistance when voting. It also assessed their confidence about whether their vote would be counted correctly. Respondents were then invited to make open-ended comments about the election process generally.

The questionnaire was administered in two counties in Ohio, one of which was Franklin County. The sample was selected using 1+ list-assisted RDD. Because telephone exchanges do not perfectly match voting precincts and overly-inclusive procedures were judged to be better than under-inclusion, the sample was drawn using telephone exchanges that completely covered Franklin County. Records were kept for each exchange, with the overall finding that 85% of the respondents were potential voters in Franklin County. Manually dialed calls were made the day of the election, as well as the following day, and were skewed towards the evening hours in order to catch many potential respondents at a convenient time. Interviewers recorded respondents' answers via paper and pencil. The data and final dispositions were coded into Excel spreadsheets.

Of the 363 responders, 274 had voted and 89 had not voted. Of voters, 207 voted in person, while the remaining 67 voted via absentee ballot. Of the 89 people who did not vote, two people provided data only for the first 4-5 (household) questions, 5 planned to vote later in the day, and 82 did not vote but did provide the additional information requested.

Presented in the tables below are demographic information for the 67 absentee voters, the 207 who voted in person, and the 82 non-voters who provided data. As can be seen in Table 1, the bulk of the sample fell between the ages of 25 to 54 and 55 or over, with only 5% belonging to the under 25 age group. As has been long documented in election research, younger cohorts were disproportionately less likely to vote, while the 55 and older group was disproportionately more likely to vote. The 55 and older group made up a disproportionately large proportion of those voting absentee. The distribution of respondents whose age is unknown most resembles the pattern seen among younger voters.

Table 1: For Each Category of Voters, Distribution of Responders by Age

Age	Voted Absentee	Vote in Person	Did not vote	Overall
Under 25	1%	3%	11%	5%
25 to 54	19%	53%	49%	46%
55 or over	76%	42%	18%	43%
Unknown	3%	3%	11%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Tables 2 and 3 present the distribution of voter category by sex and race of respondent. Six percent of the sample did not respond to the sex of respondent question.

Table 2: For Each Category of Voters, Distribution of Responders by Sex

Sex	Voted Absentee	Vote in Person	Did not vote	Overall
Female	73%	57%	49%	58%
Male	24%	43%	30%	36%
Nonresponse	3%	*	21%	6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Indicates less than 1%, but greater than 0

Table 3: For Each Category of Voters, Distribution of Responders by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Voted Absentee	Vote in Person	Did not vote	Overall
Caucasian/White	78%	79%	48%	71%
African American	10%	12%	20%	13%
All other*	7%	6%	10%	8%
Nonresponse	4%	3%	22%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Asian/Pacific Islander.; Hispanic; Native American; Other

Even assuming those who did not answer the sex of responder question were all male, responders are far more likely to be female than male. Female respondents constituted a disproportionately high percentage of those who voted absentee, which may be partially explained by the fact a larger portion of the over 55 population is female. Those who did not respond to the sex of responder question were disproportionately less likely to vote.

Both item and unit nonresponse pose potential threats to the external validity of survey research. This is because people who do not respond to specific items of a survey—or who refuse to cooperate with the survey entirely—are often unlike those who agree to participate in the survey and answer the questions. When studies simply use data from first round respondents and ignore item and unit nonresponse, this makes the generalization of sample characteristics to the population of interest problematic, at best. Further, while analytical techniques do exist to try to correct for some of the problems associated with missing data, such techniques are post hoc and constitute no replacement for obtaining the data in the first place.

In an effort to address this problem, we tried using capture/recapture techniques with regard to the Franklin County data. Capture/Recapture techniques are one of the best methods available to handle missing data problems (Scheuren, 2007). These deal with nonresponse by directly sampling nonrespondents (Hansen and Hurwitz, 1946), while at the same time re-sampling a group of people who responded in the original study. By sampling previous respondents and nonrespondents at a later date, researchers can compare the characteristics of nonrespondents to original respondents, as well as second time respondents to original respondents, thus disaggregating the effects of second-round sampling from the characteristics associated with nonresponse. The technique is, thus, an attempt to triangulate the effects of nonresponse on the sample characteristics and, hence, obtain—with a reasonable degree of confidence—the true characteristics of the population. This study implemented the capture/recapture technique for one day in December

2006, obtaining responses from both households originally in the survey and households which did not initially respond. The questionnaire consisted of a very short set of questions about a Franklin County Congressional House race which had not yet been decided. Unfortunately, the results of the capture/recapture test were not conclusive, as potential respondents were no longer interested in the topic by December and, hence, the second survey was judged unusable. Nonetheless, the approach is a valid one that bears consideration for the future.

During Election Day in November 2006 and on the following day, 8,985 phone numbers were called by NORC staff, most twice. From these initial contacts, 364 completed questionnaire responses were obtained. Of the nonresponders, 6,087 appeared to be outside of the scope of the survey (e.g., businesses, dormitories or non-working numbers). There were 2,534 nonresponders who were probably in-scope (i.e., residential working phone numbers). Of these “in-scope” nonresponders, 1,541 were answering machines (some of which may have been businesses and, hence, really were out-of-scope), 205 were busy (some of which may have been out-of-scope), and 788 were refusals, hang-ups or “call back later.” Of the 364 questionnaire responses obtained, one was classified as a refusal, because the only data obtained were for age, gender and ethnicity. Characteristics of the 363 responders follow.

Some Highlights on Problems Found

The most important highlight is that about one-sixth or 35 of the 207 voters who voted in person had one or more problems. There were 12 individuals who had difficulty finding the polling location. There were 4 respondents who said that their name was not on the list of registered voters, 2 reported their identification was not accepted, and 4 responded that their right to vote was challenged in some other way.

Table 4: Who Had Problems? Percentages by Sex of those Voting in Person

Sex	Getting to Use Ballot	Using the Ballot	General
Female	10.23%	3.41%	5.68%
Male	10.17%	0.85%	10.17%
Unknown	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Table 5: Who Had Problems? Percentages by Ethnicity of those Voting in Person

Ethnicity	Getting to Use Ballot	Using the Ballot	General
Caucasian/White	7.05%	1.92%	6.41%
African American	29.17%	4.35%	16.67%
All other*	13.64%	0.00%	14.29%

* Asian/Pacific Islander.; Hispanic; Native American; Other

Table 6: Who Had Problems? Percentages by Age of those Voting in Person

Age	Getting to Use Ballot	Using the Ballot	General
Under 25	14.29%	0.00%	0.00%
25 to 54	12.73%	1.82%	10.91%
55 or over	7.06%	2.35%	5.88%
Unknown	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

The tables above provide a breakdown by demographic characteristics of who (of 207 people voting in person) had problems voting. For example, of the 88 males who voted in person; the table by gender indicates that 10.23% of them had problems getting to use the ballot. The table by race shows 29.17% of the African Americans voting in person had problems getting to use the ballot (i.e., 7 out of 24 African Americans respondents). Of course, all of these numbers, except the overall estimate of voters with problems (one in six) are too small to be used alone but if the survey had

been national might have constituted something statistically significant. They are only shown here for illustrative purposes.

Scaled-Up Scorecard Approach

The National Elections Scorecard survey proposed would be conducted as a telephone survey, backed-up by a limited number of well-designed exit polls. Plans are for NORC to conduct the telephone survey and BYU to carry out a limited number of exit polls across the country to give context and detail to the larger RDD effort.

The telephone surveying would be conducted in two periods: (1) beginning Sunday evening and then throughout on the day before the election, and (2) on Election Day, itself, the Scorecard Survey would sample from the remaining 60% to 70% of the voters. If BYU is also able to conduct exit polling nationwide, these results would be integrated in and used to confirm the RDD results. Some key parts of the approach:

- Using the vote counts by the media—available on public Websites maintained throughout the election—we would reweight the data by gender, age, and possibly race.
- Plans are to report preliminary national voter Scorecard results on Wednesday, right after the official election results are known.
- Methods will be based on those used in the 2006 election study in Ohio, where the comparability of exit poll results with telephone surveys conducted the day of the election was established.
- Questionnaire design is to be based on the third generation of the survey developed for the Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2004 exit poll study and the second generation of the Ohio telephone survey, still in preparation.
- A large random sample of household telephone number will be selected, in order to obtain at least 11,000 completed surveys.
- Results from well-designed exit polls will be used with the telephone survey results to address potential undercoverage of voters by the telephone sampling frame, as the sampling of cell phone-only households will not probably be undertaken.
- The survey telephone process will provide reliable national and state representative information regarding voter satisfaction with the election process.

With this Scorecard Survey, we should be able to ascertain whether polling place problems that occur are systematic or if they are due to extenuating circumstances that are limited to certain local areas.

Preliminary Results Election Day 2008

NORC conducted a public opinion poll in two regions of the country to provide a snapshot of the voter experience during the 2008 presidential election. As part of this study, NORC conducted a telephone sample survey from a list of people in Franklin County Ohio who requested early voting. The following are observations we have from those voters that decided to vote absentee by mail.

- This was the first time many of these people voted absentee.
- They chose to vote this way to avoid expected long lines at polling locations.
- They were not choosing to vote absentee because they wanted to avoid using electronic voting machines, even though most had seen media reports criticizing electronic voting.

Overall, these absentee voters were satisfied with the voting process, and they believe that their vote will be counted accurately.

These are preliminary results, and NORC plans to have a full analysis of voter experience, both early and Election Day voting, posted to the website <http://www.norc.org/voter>.

Concluding Remarks

We believe that a National Scorecard approach will provide a better backdrop for evaluating and fixing election problems compared to the “knee-jerk” reaction approach employed by political observers—including national, state, and local officials—in response to anecdotal media stories. Of course, we realize that the National Scorecard approach will have its own problems—in particular, a high nonresponse rate—and that statistical methods may be necessary to adjust for them.

Still, the National Scorecard could aid in achieving the needed broader look at the election process. It would also, in itself, help develop metrics that make the election process more transparent and present a valid picture of the overall voting system in the U.S. How common are problems such as long lines at polling places and disenfranchisement of voters? We could replace anecdote with statistical data, if we are able to mount a National Voter Scorecard.

In our view, the bottom line is that making system-wide changes to the nation’s elections based on isolated incidents does not provide the quickest path to quality improvement. Instead, a broader review of the voting system is needed in order to determine how to address problems in the election process. Letting voters keep score would be one part of the effort to continue improvements.

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