

THE VOTER RESEARCH AND SURVEYS 1990 EXIT POLLS

In 1988, four media polling organizations—those of CBS News and the New York Times, ABC News and the Washington Post, NBC News and the Wall Street Journal, and the Los Angeles Times—conducted exit polls nationally. This year only one conducted election day polls around the country—The Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) unit established by CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN. Warren J. Mitofsky, who had been executive director of the election and survey unit at CBS News, is executive director of VRS. In an interview with *Public Perspective* (May/June 1990 issue), Mitofsky argued that, on financial grounds alone, the consolidation was unavoidable. “I don’t think that any network alone would have continued funding election coverage at the level it had previously,” he observed. He granted that “a lessening of competition in this area may have consequences for election analysts. We just don’t know now. We will make a careful evaluation after the 1990 elections.”

As part of its continuing coverage of the polls, *Public Perspective* takes a look at the 1990 VRS experience. How well did it work—from matters of nuts and bolts, to what it means having just one national exit poll. *Perspective* talked with Richard Morin, director of polling, the Washington Post, and Jim Norman, polling coordinator, USA Today, about this. Both papers had contracted with VRS to get election-night access to the data. Warren Mitofsky responds to critics.

Richard Morin: Sadly, for VRS and for the Washington Post the inaugural run didn’t work well at all. We had the same problem with the national data that other news organizations had. We simply did not get the data at all on election night. In addition, we had another problem. We had contracted to get data on a District of Columbia exit poll on election night. This was of particular interest to us—frankly of more interest than the national data. We had never done a local exit poll; I had convinced the Metro section that we would be able to do a sophisticated election night analysis that would be better than anything done in the past. Unfortunately the data for DC also were delayed. We did get them, but just 20 minutes before our deadline for the story. Of course there was no chance to do any analysis. My story was in English, but I can’t tell you too much else about it.

I don’t want to fault Warren Mitofsky and his VRS associates. They had a terrifically ambitious undertaking, and not nearly enough time to develop it. The networks had dawdled—waited far too long before deciding to do a combined national exit poll. Warren and his people simply didn’t have the time to do the testing necessary to deliver the data. Any national exit poll, particularly when you’re in all the states, is a challenging effort, even under the best of circumstances. But VRS was chartered in April and expected to turn around an exit poll in November. That was just impossible. We at the Post paid a price, but I feel badly for everyone involved.

Public Perspective: What role did you play in designing the questions asked by VRS?

RM: None. This is a network operation, and we were just along for the ride. As a courtesy, we were asked what would be interesting to include in the Washington, DC exit poll and suggested some questions that were used. But we were not involved in questionnaire construction.

PP: What about William Schneider’s quip that one exit poll is worse than none. Do you agree with that?

RM: That’s clever—but I don’t think either he or I would want to hold too fast to that conclusion. There are obvious problems. Having only one poll increases the responsibility of the data users to think about the numbers. You have to challenge every single number because you don’t have the easy comparisons. You can’t put an ABC or an NBC poll finding along side its CBS counterpart and see if they tell the same story. E.J. Dionne and I have written an article in the Post about the VRS finding that 22% of blacks voted Republican in House of Representatives races around the country—way up from past elections. Is this number valid? Many experts we talked to doubt it. But this year there is no other exit poll to compare it to.

In general, comparing the findings of a number of organizations is a good use of survey data. Report what all the polls say, and that implies all the real world problems that affect survey data a lot better than something like margin of sampling error, which no one understands and creates this false patina of scientific precision over what is a human enterprise fraught with potential error. This year we had just one number and it became revealed truth. A first time or just occasional user of survey results will hold fast to that number and it tends not to be challenged. Unless you are a pretty sophisticated analyst familiar with data, you have no reason to question it.

PP: What about the responsibility of major communications media like the Post: Do you have a responsibility to the research community, and hence to the public, to fund more than one set of exit polls so that results can be compared? Does your responsibility extend that far?

RM: That’s a good question. I don’t think we have a responsibility to the research community, even though we

welcome their use of survey results. We do have a responsibility to the public that we serve, and in particular our readers. There's clearly a need for a second exit poll — at least one more. This is no reflection on Warren Mitofsky or the VRS effort — in fact, if there is a second exit poll, I could easily see it facing the same or a worse problem than Warren and VRS faced—but you just need it for purposes of comparison. I could envision our being involved in co-sponsoring a national exit poll and also buying VRS national and state data.

PP: Is it realistic to think about convening a small group—people outside the media as well as those within it, with differing intellectual perspectives, but a common involvement in electoral studies—well in advance of a contest to plan the structure of an exit poll questionnaire to provide a range of analytical perspectives? Or is that simply not feasible, because the news organizations which pay for the exit poll will see its design as their own concern?

RM: There's much to be said about convening some such "advisory council," but I'm afraid the media is a little shy about having people look over their shoulders. I'm not applying this to VRS; frankly I'm applying it to the Washington Post newsroom. There's a Lone Ranger mentality—where I do it all and I don't need help from you or anyone else. Even the best-intentioned attempts to offer help are rebuffed. Also, there's the matter of time—something VRS did not have. I'm surprised they were able to do anything, given the entirely understandable and desirable competitive attitudes that the networks have toward each other. I'm surprised they aren't still arguing over the design of the questionnaire. And to get that group in with other groups...good luck!

*Richard Morin is director of polling,
the Washington Post*

Jim Norman: We contracted with VRS to get the results from their national poll and from four states: North Carolina, Florida, Texas, and California. There was a major commitment on the part of this paper. We had a four-person polling team; each was assigned a slice of what we were going to be doing. Plus, we had Philip Meyer [of the University of North Carolina] assist us. And that was just for analysis of the data. In addition, we had a battery of reporters, and graphic artists, and editors who were to be directly involved in handling the exit poll results. This was a far cry from the way we approached it in 1988, when we had a reporter go to one of the network bureaus here in Washington and phone-in some of the figures supplied by the network.

Mitofsky. He went off the phone, came back, and said in all good conscience he couldn't tell us to run the national numbers as they had them at that time. Our entire plan for Wednesday morning coverage was shot.

We all came in early the next morning, thinking at least we could come back with a hell of a Thursday package. You can imagine my surprise when I got in and found out that, despite their efforts through the night, VRS still didn't have numbers that they felt confident in. So we went an entirely different route in our Thursday morning coverage. Warren called at mid-afternoon Wednesday to tell us they had data they finally felt they could release. But by that point, we were committed to the back-up plan....

We looked upon the exit poll in 1990 as a wonderful opportunity to be able to add depth to our coverage. We held exhaustive meetings to try and come up with the best use of the material we would be getting. We designed a "mega-graphic" that would dominate a major inside page of coverage. Our main cover story was to be on the mood of America, and it was largely going to hinge on the results we were able to derive from the national poll. We had people writing about abortion, and S & L scandals and their impact, and the anti-incumbent factor. In short, in every regard the national exit poll results were to be at the center of our 1990 election coverage.

I empathize with the people I dealt with at VRS. I know they were trying hard. But, when something like this happens, it has to raise concerns. Is the problem the very fact that VRS is a consortium? We got an announcement less than two weeks before the election, to the effect that a major change had been taken in the way they were going to compile the data, that the national exit poll would now be taken from all congressional races, rather than only the contested races. That kind of a decision shouldn't have been made so late in the game. If the networks are constantly second-guessing each other and not reaching final decisions until the absolute latest deadlines, that's a major concern for us....

We had everything set. We had people ready to go, just waiting for the national data. But the data never came. Very late into the evening there was a conference in the office of our managing editor for news. Julia Wallace, the managing editor of special projects (which includes the polling and database operations), called up Warren

One final point. I don't want to beat VRS over the head, because the election night experience must have been horrible for them, more than for anyone else. And I don't know how much of the problem was because they

POLLS IN THE 1990 ELECTIONS: THE VRS STORY/MITOFSKY

didn't have the resources allocated to be able to handle things, or whether it was just one of those things you have nightmares about, that something is going to go wrong and you can't find out what it is. In the end, they produced all the numbers they said they would, so the data are there for historical purposes. Unfortunately for us, we only had

a space of a few hours where we either got the information or it was of no use to us. We didn't get the information. For us, what happened afterward was irrelevant.

*Jim Norman is polling coordinator,
USA Today*

Public Perspective: Richard Morin and Jim Norman say, in effect: "VRS are great folks, but we just didn't get the data on time."

Warren Mitofsky: First, it needs to be noted that they and other users did get the state poll data in a timely fashion; only the national data were late.

PP: What happened to cause the delays with the latter?

WM: Well, with VRS we had five months less than we told the networks was our absolute minimum for getting going. Given our too-hecktic schedule, we left for the last those things which were the easiest, which we were most confident about. Unfortunately, some of the easiest things didn't work. One of them had to do with weighting the national poll. We never did get this taken care of election night.

PP: Both Morin and Norman agree with your basic point that the main problem was that the networks dawdled, putting off key decisions far too long.

WM: Yes—but remember that it wasn't the planning of the national exit poll as such that was late; it was the startup of the whole joint venture that was late. It was suppose to start October 1, 1989. In fact, it started March 1, 1990. This was a one-time problem. But this time there wasn't enough time. Still, we managed to get up and working most of what we tried to do. Unfortunately something as visible as the national poll didn't get done right. We supported four networks and their graphic systems, and took data both from NES and Chilton, which meant we had an extremely complex data system. That we brought off so much was a major accomplishment.

PP: Other than the fact that this was so large an undertaking, and that you didn't have the time you needed to bring everything together—was there some special, unexpected problem?

WM: No, not really. We had what you would call the typical growing pains for a new venture. All the parties to this—the four networks—had never cooperated in election coverage before, so we were resolving the corporate egos of at least three of them—those which had operated their own systems in the past. We had as much problem

resolving things with CBS as with ABC and NBC, and we had to convince them we weren't going to do just what we had previously. Now we had to satisfy four players, not just one. CNN, with no history in such election day polling, was no problem.

PP: In your interview with us in late April, looking ahead to this venture, you said that "the new arrangement is going to be good for the public, I think. They're going to get one high quality product, and they're going to get it on a continuing basis because now the cost is reasonable. I don't think they had any prospect of getting that the way things were going." Any need now to amend those observations?

WM: No. That's a statement I'd repeat again today. I'd add now that there are a number of states where you would not have had polls in 1990 were the networks doing them individually. I doubt very seriously whether there would have been a poll in New Jersey in Bill Bradley's race. Any one network alone would have concluded that Bradley had a victory in the bag and that it wasn't sensible to invest in an exit poll.

PP: You went on to say: "On the other hand, a lessening of competition in this area may have consequences for election analysts. We just don't know. We will make a careful evaluation after the 1990 elections." Any further thoughts on that side of things?

WM: Obviously, analysts had problems when the product wasn't there. We don't anticipate that problem in the future. It was in fact a minor problem...even if it had a major effect.

PP: With regard to the need for more than one poll, you could easily respond: "If you think it's great to have two or three, go out and find the money to do the others."

WM: That's exactly my answer.

PP: Still, do we suffer from having only one set of numbers? Richard Morin and E.J. Dionne wrote a Washington Post piece on the "22% argument." Were black voters really 22% Republican in the 1990 congressional vote? Some observers think this VRS finding substantially overstated the GOP share. But we don't know

whether there really was an electoral shift or just a blip on one poll.

WM: I don't think it is just a blip. We've done a lot more investigation of this matter and can't find a single thing wrong with the number. It is true that the sampling error on the characteristics of blacks has got to be high. Any characteristic which clusters like that must have an enormous margin of error in an exit poll. Having said that, I don't think the number is wrong. I'd stand by it. We looked at every conceivable way we could have had a problem with that data—from the sampling, to the transmission of the data from Chilton. We looked at things precinct by precinct. There was one problem which I didn't know about when I spoke to Richard Morin; it had to do with the coding of what is urban, suburban, and rural. The codes which they had looked at were not the national

codes, but the state codes which were not uniform across the various states. The basic point is: our data on black voting were sound....There was a very low black turnout in the 1990 congressional races, and the blacks who turned out, just like the whites who turned out, were the better educated, the more affluent.

PP: What's the verdict among your sponsors, the networks? Are they comfortable about going ahead with this consortium?

WM: They are comfortable because essentially it is a successful venture. They're comfortable with the cost. They're not comfortable with all the arrangements because they are still not getting what they had before. But these are really matters of operating detail, not serious reasons for rethinking the basic design.

*Warren Mitofsky is executive director,
Voter Research and Surveys*

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