

# Tracking Polls: How We Did Them

***A Roper Center Symposium with Jeffrey Alderman, Peter Feld, Lori Gudermuth, Larry McGill, Frank Newport, Glenn Roberts, and John Zogby***

During the 1996 election cycle four media-sponsored daily tracking polls measured the ebb and flow of the election. No prior election compares in terms of the number of individual temperature readings that were taken in the weeks leading up to Election Day. From Labor Day through to the election the Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll and The Tarrance Group/Lake Research consortium's *Battleground/Hotline* poll, provided daily presidential vote choice figures for politicians, pundits, and the public to digest. The Zogby/Reuters poll began its daily tracking at the beginning of October, and ABC News followed in mid-October.

We have invited Jeffrey Alderman, director of polling for ABC News, Peter Feld, vice president of Lake Research, Lori Gudermuth, vice president of The Tarrance Group, Frank Newport, editor-in-chief for The Gallup Poll, John Zogby, president and CEO of The Zogby Group, as well as Larry McGill, director of research for the Media Studies Center, and Glenn Roberts of Glenn Roberts Research, to participate in a discussion of the surveys' methodologies, media reporting of the data, and the tracking polls' impact on the election.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Larry McGill and the Media Studies Center for hosting these discussions.

**Public Perspective:** Describe for our readers the survey methodology employed in your tracking polls.

**John Zogby:** I suspect that our methods are different because we do not use random-digit dialing (RDD). Instead, we use a CD-ROM of listed telephone numbers throughout the contiguous 48 states. But we insure that our sampling frames are representative of every household, area code and three-digit exchange we draw from.

Over the years, both personal experience and research I have examined suggests that there is no advantage to RDD. First, there has been a significant democratization of unlisted telephone numbers. Second, in tracking polls you may run into caller fatigue or caller discretion that may involve skipping sampling frames that have not been productive. Third, in our follow-up studies and comparisons of RDD samples to the samples we draw, we have found no difference in our demographic groups.

**Frank Newport:** Our basic methodology in our tracking surveys is the same and hopefully even enhanced over what we would do for any national Gallup poll. Our fundamental assumption is an equal probability of selection. We want every household in America to have an equal chance of falling into the sample. For that reason we use random-digit dialing procedures.

In comparison to our routine Gallup polls we enhanced our call-back procedure for our tracking survey. We employed a five call-back design throughout our tracking which allowed for more call-backs than is possible for many of our non-tracking Gallup polls. Further, we did a complete within-household selection where we asked the respondent to list by age and gender every adult in the household. We randomly selected one adult and then proceeded to employ the five call-backs designed for the individual who was selected. The tracking actually allows us to do that better than we could do in a normal two or three-day poll, because we can actually come back to that same number over the course of several days.

Our data were derived from two days of completed interviews, so, for example, Monday and Tuesday night's completed interviews were rolled together. But for an individual who was in Tuesday night's sample, our first approach to that individual—once that number fell into the sample and once he or she was selected randomly within the household—could have been initiated two to five days before.

**Jeffrey Alderman:** Essentially, we used the same method we use for all of our other polling as well. Our method is pretty consistent with the methods Frank has described with one major exception—we do not use a call-back procedure (in the traditional sense). Instead we do an at-home sample.

If someone picks up the phone we make every effort to get an interview among those at home. We will call back later that night if it will be more convenient for the respondent we have selected, but after that we move on to a new phone number. We have found that call-backs beyond the same evening are a waste of time and money.

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For our tracking survey, we introduced a “live sample” method. About 20% of each night’s sample was left over from a previous night where the phone rang but no one answered. Some will find that to be a major difference between ABC’s practices and the more traditional methods used at CBS and Gallup in terms of call-backs but we save ourselves a great deal of money, time, and effort. We’re able to process a lot more of the sample by not making appointments to talk to people three days later.

**Lori Gudermuth:** For our tracking research we used RDD with a minimum of three callbacks. After examining our unlisted versus our listed numbers we found large concentrations of unlisted numbers, especially in California. This, coupled with the mobility among younger voters, minority voters, and anyone more likely to rent rather than own a home, has led us to stay with RDD.

One thing we did differently than the other pollsters doing a daily tracking was that we only interviewed Sunday through Thursday. We have found that in certain areas of the country Friday and Saturday calling has extreme problems—we tend to get much older and more liberal samples. We did a separate poll on the Saturday and Sunday before the election and, actually, found that our numbers for Monday-Thursday of the previous week had been more accurate.

**Peter Feld:** When we have done tracking for political clients, we have avoided Fridays and Saturdays for the same reason. It’s an assumption that needs to be periodically reexamined, but for now we just feel more confident avoiding those days.

**JA:** We’ve noticed this Friday-Saturday phenomenon too.

**FN:** We did not find a significant day of the week effect.

**JZ:** Just for the record, we do at least three call-backs on our sample and we call all day long, 9 am to 9 pm local time. Then we start with an entirely new sample the next day.

**Glenn Roberts:** Don’t you find that those you call in the morning tend to be disproportionately women?

**JZ:** Only slightly. America has changed; there are people who work swing shifts and people who are unemployed. We average about 30% of our calls before 5 pm local time, 70% of our calls afterward.

**PP:** If you do 70% of your calls after five and you’re doing three same day call-backs, what is your success rate on those call-backs?

**JZ:** It’s not very high, but we do have the opportunity to reach people not previously or otherwise available.

**PP:** Do each of you calculate response rates for any of the tracking polls you conduct? And how seriously do you promote achieving a high response rate?

**FN:** We take promoting high response rates seriously. Our assumption is that the higher the response rate, the better off we are.

**JZ:** We average a response rate of 60 to 65%. These numbers reflect those who complete the interview versus those who don’t complete the survey or refuse to participate. This figure does not include respondents who were repeatedly not at home.

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On a different subject, if I may, Jeff, I have read interviews where you have called party identification a dependent variable and I don’t see it that way. I see it fundamentally as an independent variable. Most people still get their party identi-



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fiction through inheritance or through experience and in most instances they carry it with them for their adult lives. In that sense, I see party identification as a variable to be weighted similar to other demographic variables.

**JA:** I agree with you that for some people party ID is a demographic as much as race is, but for some people, they go to bed a Republican and wake up a Democrat, and that's not a good weight to use.

**FN:** Look at 1994 as an example. Had we gone in with preconceived notions about party identification, we would have been significantly off the mark. Our final allocated likely-voter model was very accurate in 1994 and there was a considerably higher number of people calling themselves Republicans.

**PP:** Do each of you have a sense that your organization does a good job communicating to the press and to viewers the level of precision that's associated with your survey findings? For example, the Zogby/Reuters results represent the vote distribution to a decimal place. John, do you think that connotes more precision than is really the case?

**JZ:** We do it only because it sets us apart.

**GR:** There are a lot of races—local and state races—where a half-percentage point may be very important in an extremely close race. You should report it that way to show the closeness. Otherwise, I wouldn't report by half-percentage points.

**JA:** We all know that the margin of error is the least likely source of error in our work—that's what we ought to be telling the public, not pretending that we're physicists. I think we could do a lot better to point that out to the public.

**FN:** Do the American people understand that you're not, in September or early October, saying this is the way the election will come out on November 5th, but you're saying that this is an estimate based on where the race stands in the minds of the people as of today? I have quite a bit of faith in the public that they understand that we're giving them an estimate for that point in time.

**PP:** The point spread between the candidates is often used as a litmus test for whether there's a change in the race. In a number of reports a change in the margin of five points was reported by the media as a real shift in the race. Clearly, the change could have been due to sampling error.

**PF:** The gap is a valid and legitimate thing to look at and it's definitely of interest, but it's twice as volatile as the actual percentages; the margin of error effectively doubles for the gap.

**JA:** I think the gap is problematic. It doubles the spread, exaggerates change.

**PP:** It has been suggested that taken as a body, the polls made the Democrats look stronger and Republicans weaker than they turned out to be on Election Day. Do you agree or disagree?

**FN:** I think the changes during the fall represented reality. That's the whole reason we continued to do polling. I don't

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think it's appropriate to say that the polls were inaccurate because, earlier on in the race, polls were showing Clinton with higher numbers than he ended up getting.

**JZ:** In some instances, the wider gap did tend to influence how the campaign was covered. Dole was portrayed often as being behind by as much as 23 points, and I didn't think enough was said to show the range of that gap.

**PF:** If consumers of our polls followed the results day-to-day, the data could create the illusion of a much more volatile race than if they examined only the average for our four-day samples. Looking at the data in this manner, there wasn't a lot of change during the months of September and October. However, we did find a narrowing toward the end of the race.

**FN:** The idea of reporting two-day results was based on our hopes that we could monitor fairly quick changes and get a feel for how much impact events such as a new ad, or Dole falling off the podium, or Clinton's Middle East Summit could have on the electorate. The trade off is that you get more short-term volatility.

**GR:** I'm not convinced that the public knows the difference between a two-day poll or a five to six-day poll. Why not publish the data weekly rather than daily? This would eliminate all this bounce and public misunderstanding.

**PP:** Do you think the daily bounce is real? Is the electorate that volatile or is the movement an artifact of sampling? If it is an



artifact are we misleading people by suggesting that the movement is real?

**JZ:** It's a result of the sampling and in some instances external events. We tried to caution in our releases that one day does not make a trend. In some instances where there did appear to be a change from one day to the next, we reported the one-day result with all the necessary caveats to suggest that somebody had a good day, or perhaps for this reason or that reason change occurred, but "stay tuned tomorrow or the next day."

**FN:** Yes. I think that, day-to-day, there were changes. A significant percent of the electorate were uncommitted. People's minds were changed as the campaign events began to hit them.

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**GR:** Frank, on October 10th, you showed a 13-point spread followed by a 23-point spread on the 11th, 21-point on the 12th, 18, 13, 9, 12, 15, then back up to 23 points on October 18th. Do you think those numbers are real?

**JA:** You're doing exactly what I warned against. You're using the gap.

**GR:** That's because the media promote the daily gap and frequently the "bounce." I oppose using the gap, but daily tracking polls tend to encourage this kind of reporting.

**FN:** I have every confidence that the public was able to look at the numbers and interpret them correctly. I have confidence in the public, and that more information is better than less. The public was able to consume it.

**PP:** Putting the individual day-to-day bounce aside, the clear message of the polls up until the election was that Clinton was somewhere in the low-50s and Dole in the mid-30s. That suggests a much bigger difference between the two and a much clearer likelihood of a Clinton victory than, in fact, the final margin showed. There was some evidence that there was a narrowing at the end or, at the very least, the picture in mid-October was not quite as close as the picture on November 5th. How much of that perception got across to the public?

**PF:** The public's perception that Dole was going to lose was not just based on the media's reporting of the latest poll results. Nothing Dole did seemed to get him any kind of traction—choosing Kemp, announcing the tax cut, giving a speech, or resigning from the Senate.

**Larry McGill:** Are we getting too much of a fluctuation in the gap because we're trying to push undecideds too hard? Don't these undecideds more or less want to remain undecided until the last minute?

**JZ:** That's a part of it. It's not reported enough that 25 to 28% of those who identify themselves as supporters of Clinton or Dole are basically "soft" supporters right up to the last week before the election.

**FN:** The whole reason the campaigns are spending millions of dollars from Labor Day to the election is to change people's minds. So it's not surprising that from day-to-day, people would be changing their minds.

**PP:** We had four tracking polls in 1996. Have we reached a saturation point?

**JZ:** No, the more, the merrier. Voters are consumers. Let them see what's out there and make their own judgments.

**FN:** The same question could be asked about news in general: Do we have too much news? And the answer to both questions is no.

**PP:** A recent Media Studies Center/Roper Center study shows that people think there's too much made about the horse race in the media. Clearly, the tracking polls promote horse race reporting.

**FN:** First, I don't think it's just tracking polls that emphasize the horse race. Second, we also asked the public (not specifically mentioning the horse race), "Do you think there are too many polls?" and we didn't find the same result.

Third, I saw a study quoted in *US News and World Report* analyzing the content of ABC, CBS, and NBC news, and they said there was significantly less coverage this year of the horse race than in 1992.

**JZ:** I think the expansion of the daily tracking polls in a very important sense has driven issues analysis and coverage. The more tracking polls, the more attempts by the networks and by the major print media to explain the changes.

The public has got so much going on in their lives they don't worry about whether there's an extra tracking poll or two. That's not going to have any impact on how they vote.



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### Concluding Thoughts

**LG:** At the national level this was a lackluster election. There was, however, some genuine excitement further down the ballot. Republicans were not enthused about their national ticket but people paid attention to Senate and Congressional races, especially in the last two weeks of the campaign.

**PF:** It's fair to say that there may have been some impact on Democratic voter turnout by the expectation that this race was a lock, but there were a combination of other factors at work. You had two candidates, both of whom were regarded with ambivalence by their base, and at the same time, you had an outcome that was considered not to be in doubt—that contributed to the tightening at the end of the race.

I don't think it's unfair that we reported 15-point races when that was probably reality at the time. Anyone who tuned in to the election the last weekend could hear whispers that a narrowing was taking place.

**JA:** One of the reasons we started tracking remains true today. Do what the politicians are doing to keep them honest. It's called scrutiny of the press and that's what I do. I'm a reporter of public opinion—that's my beat. We're not in market research, but news.

We need to have some tool to bring the public into the broadcast. There are plenty of other means of doing it beyond polling, but there's certainly no better way. Sure, the horse race may become repetitive. You may get tired of it and you may think it's stealing the election, but it's also providing a wealth of information about other issues that are on the American agenda.

**FN:** If you don't do accurate independent polling, people will look for it in other sources. George Gallup used to say that reporters would go into the bars and ask people whom they supported, and arrive at some guess anyhow. Or

perhaps worse, they'd look for leaks from the campaign—from people who would be more than happy to selectively give out information.

People also are guided by the need for social comparison. They sometimes like to make their choices based on how other people stand. They ask their friends,

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“Who are you going to vote for?” Polling gives them a mechanism for doing that.

**GR:** This has been a valuable discussion on the important issue of daily tracking polls. We now know more about the daily tracking methodologies. We have learned there are some differences in sample design, weighting and reporting data.

With all these differences, one wonders why tracking polls are published and compared without clearly pointing out the differences and approaches to election polling each polling organization employs. It's no surprise that they frequently come up with different results.

Daily tracking polls should not be published. Leave tracking for the campaign strategists. Tracking polls were designed for internal use—as a strategy tool for candidates with private pollsters—not to be released unless the findings were favorable to their candidates. Then they were usually “leaked” to reporters.

Public opinion researchers have allowed the “private pollster” to take over the process and turn it into a “public poll” by publishing the daily tracking.

Now it's the common thing, and I think it's bad for the public and for public opinion research.

**JZ:** This was not a 20-point race. While no chance was given to Dole, polling certainly didn't suggest that there was one. There was enough action in congressional, state, and local elections to

suggest a substantial Republican turnout and at least the potential for a bottom-up impact in a narrowed race. We watched that closely as we polled nationally, and in states, congressional districts, state senate districts, and so on.

We were able to suggest why the race tightened. The Indonesian campaign contribution and all of that business, in a very important respect, chiseled away at Bill Clinton's support. And in the final analysis, the undecideds broke towards Dole whom they considered to be the real challenger and not Perot.

Daily tracking is a good thing. The only problem is that this race was not a blockbuster. So we can congratulate ourselves that we survived a boring election intact. Ultimately, daily tracking as well as the other polling that we do serves a very useful purpose. People want to be connected and know where they fit into the mainstream, and we're offering them a bridge, and with our bridge, they don't have to wait until the 21st century. They can have it right now.





## Correction

In the August/September 1996 issue of this magazine, we published an article entitled "Nine Thoughts for Campaign '96," with the by-line of "John Brennan and Patrick Reddy." At the time I approved this by-line, I knew that the piece itself had been written by Pat after John's death, based on discussions of the subject they had earlier and general conclusions they had together reached. I thought, then, that Pat's desire to assign formal co-authorship was an appropriate step intellectually, as it was a thoughtful gesture and tribute.

However, the executors of John Brennan's estate have expressed their concern with the by-line. John Brennan never wrote any of the piece itself or even saw it. I want to emphasize to our readers that the article was in fact written by Patrick Reddy alone. Mr. Reddy regrets any potential misunderstandings about this project.

—ECL—

# Assessing the Polls' Performance in the 1996 Election

Immediately following the November 5 election, I wrote an *opinion piece* for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with the title, "The Election Polls: an American Waterloo." The piece was intended to be provocative, but not in any sense to disparage the enterprise of polling or its researchers. An excerpt from this piece was subsequently published in the *Wall Street Journal* (November 19, 1996)—and, to put it mildly, a considerable controversy ensued. I extended an invitation to several critics of my piece to rebut me in the pages of this magazine; Kathy Frankovic and Frank Newport accepted this invitation, and their rebuttals follow.

The Roper Center exists through the generosity of many survey organizations. These organizations contribute their data to the Center's archive, permitting it to make the information available to a broad community of researchers and students. For its part, the Center works hard to secure from a wide variety of sources the funding necessary to manage this data library. User fees do not begin to cover the costs. Thus, the Center truly is a cooperative venture aimed at the high purpose of information sharing.

The Center not only manages a library of public opinion data—it is a "partisan" of polling. One dimension of our partisanship—our belief that opinion polling serves a large and important democratic purpose—is our strong desire to see problems that polling confronts acknowledged and addressed. Some of the most acute of these result from developments

exogenous to the enterprise—notably the escalating refusal rates that appear to be in large part a protest not against opinion research, but against the vast overuse of the telephone for sales and solicitations. Obviously, high refusal rates, especially when greater among some groups than others, compound the problem of estimating the likely vote.

Polling on elections is an especially sensitive area because it, in effect, advises a citizenry on what they in the large seem prepared to do. In the election just concluded, the vast proliferation of poll trial heats over the stretch of the campaign told Americans that their fellow citizens seemed prepared to re-elect Bill Clinton by a margin of landslide proportions. Much other data, however, including much other poll-derived data, suggested otherwise—an argument I've advanced in many recent articles, including one in the previous issue of this magazine ("The Polls and the Election," October/November 1996, pp. 4-6). In my *Chronicle of Higher Education/Wall Street Journal* article, I worried that the proliferation of poll trial heats, suggesting, through the inevitable overemphasis on the gap between the front-runner and his challenger, that the contest was essentially settled—when in fact it wasn't—may have had an unfortunate impact on the electoral process. It may, in particular, have *contributed* to the unprecedented drop-off in voter participation shown on page 5. I continue to believe that a frank discussion of such problems and concerns is beneficial to an enterprise which is itself now an essential tool of American democracy.

—ECL—