# The Pre-Election Polls Performed Well in '96

***by Frank Newport***

I appreciate having the opportunity to respond to Everett Carl Ladd's "The Pollsters' Waterloo," as published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and excerpted on the November 19 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page. The comments below summarize my interpretation of the evidence associated with a number of the points made in Dr. Ladd's article.

By most reasonable standards, it seems to me that pre-election presidential polling this year was quite accurate. The final pre-election estimates made by leading national polling organizations were remarkably close to the final election results. The "Polls Away from Reality" table included with Ladd's article mixed polls where the undecided vote had *not* been allocated with polls where it *had* been. Still, based on this published table, the average trial heat percentage for Clinton across all 8 polls was 49.88%, the average for Dole was 38%, and the average for Perot was 7.88%. All three of these average sample estimates are within the typical three percent margin of error associated with national polls, and two of the average sample estimates are within less than one point of the actual election day population parameter.

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Four polling organizations allocated undecideds and made final estimates of the disposition of 100% of the vote: Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, Harris, Pew, and Zogby/Reuters:

**Allocated Final Estimates by Four Polling Organizations**

| | Clinton | Dole | Perot | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* | 52% | 41% | 7% | - |
| Harris | 51 | 39 | 9 | 1% |
| Pew | 52 | 38 | 9 | 1 |
| Zogby/Reuters | 49 | 41 | 8 | 2 |

The range in these estimates for each candidate is remarkably small: 3 points for Clinton (49% to 52%), 3 points for Dole (38% to 41%), and 2 points for Perot (7% to 9%). The average estimate across these four polls is 51%/40%/8%, with a net total deviation from the three observed population parameters of only 3 percentage points (2% for Clinton, 1% for Dole, 0% for Perot). The average error across the three estimates is only 1%—all very much within any calculation of the margin of error associated with national samples.

Given the potential difficulties inherent in measuring the vote intentions of a population of which only 49% will actually vote, these results represent a striking validation of the accuracy and precision of election polling and the survey research industry. They do not suggest a "terrible year" for election polling, nor do they seem to suggest a performance "so flawed" that it is necessary to urgently convene a blue-ribbon panel of experts to review them. As David Winston of the *PoliticsNow* web site said in his November 15 assessment of the polls, "Despite the hue and cry, the polls came very close to predicting the outcome."

There is little evidence that pre-election presidential polls have systematically overestimated Democrats' share of the vote. Gallup's final estimate of the Democratic presidential candidate's share of the vote in all 12 election polls conducted since 1948 has been only .55 of a point higher than the final Democratic vote result.

The pre-election polls did not consistently suggest "throughout the campaign" that Clinton's lead was so great that he would likely win the popular vote by a landslide. Gallup and other national polls often had Clinton's lead over Dole in the low to mid-teens, and occasionally in the single digits. Taken as a whole, no poll or compilation of polls showed consistent 20 plus, Clinton over Dole, leads. Although Clinton led Bob Dole in all pre-election polls, the exact size of that lead varied from week to week and from poll to poll. At one point in late September, the Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* Poll had Bill Clinton with 48-49% of the vote and Bob Dole with 38-39% for several consecutive days. On October 14-15, Gallup reported a two-day rolling average with Clinton getting 48% of the vote and Bob Dole 39%, a 9-point Clinton lead. Most importantly, the fact that a pre-election poll shows a significant lead for one candidate over another in September or October by no means implies a fault with the poll if the eventual outcome of the race in early November

is different. Changes in election preferences are what a campaign is all about, and presidential races can often tighten or expand in the final days of a campaign.

Survey data reported by Gallup and other national polling organizations this fall fully documented the generally conservative mood of the electorate, Dole's perceived integrity, and Clinton's character problems. The gap between these findings and Clinton's consistent trial-heat lead, in fact, formed one of the major stories developed out of the polls this year. The fact that Bob Dole was not able to capitalize on these underlying dynamics, and ultimately was unable to come close to winning on November 5, indicated a problem with the candidate, not the polls.

There is no evidence I am aware of that the "sheer volume" of pre-election polls was perceived by the public this year to be higher than in previous years. In fact, the data suggest just the opposite. A post-election panel study conducted by Gallup in November of this year shows that the percent of registered voters who say they saw or heard the results of any pre-election polls was only 59%, significantly lower than the 77% response to the same question in a Gallup post-election poll study conducted in 1992. Additionally, a study of the 1996 election conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, as quoted in the November 18, 1996 *US News and World Report*, said that in 1996 "network coverage concentrated less on the 'horse race' aspects of the contest and more on substantive issues."

There is also no systematic evidence to support the hypothesis that pre-election polls in 1996 "dampened voters' interest and hence participation" in the election and were even partially responsible for this year's lower turnout.

It seems difficult to support the assertion that pre-election polls "as of late have missed the mark by margins well in excess of the Gallup results in 1948." The average deviation from Gallup's final estimates of the major candidates to the actual election outcome in 1948 was 5.0 points. In the twelve races since then, including this year, the average deviation for each candidate's estimate, compared to the election outcome, was 2.0 points. "As of late," for the five elections since 1980, the average deviation has been only 2.2 points, including this year's 1.3 average deviation. Additionally, Gallup's final pre-election polls since 1948 have correctly predicted the eventual winner in every election, or have indicated that the race was within one or two points and too close to call (1976, 1968, 1960).

There is little evidence to suggest that polling has lost public esteem or must engage in a "major reassessment" in order to regain public esteem. A Gallup survey conducted this past spring, and reported in the Roper Center's *Public Perspective* magazine, found that survey participants—in a national probability sample—generally gave polls a positive rating, and that "more respondents today than in previous years [gave] positive evaluations to the use of polls by political leaders and the contributions polls make to the country." And very importantly, the vast majority of registered voters re-contacted by Gallup in its 1996 post-election panel study said that their impression was that this year's pre-election polls were generally accurate (45%), or that they did not see or hear the results of any pre-election polls (41%). Only 10% said that they thought the pre-election polls were generally inaccurate—scant evidence that the polling industry this year suffered a crippling blow to its legitimacy.

Polling experts already meet regularly to discuss election polling, and regularly share in great detail "information on their methods," both at these meetings and in scholarly journals. Gallup, for one, has a long history of sharing and discussing its pre-election polling methods, including—for example—a detailed paper on our likely voter methods and validation studies presented at last May's AAPOR conference. Convening an additional "group of high professional standing" to review election polling might not be a bad idea, but it is likely that such a group would end up discussing what went right in the polling this year, not what went wrong.

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