Field Methods
http://fmx.sagepub.com/

Exit and Entrance Polling: A Comparison of Election Survey Methods

Casey A. Klofstad and Benjamin G. Bishin

Field Methods published online 31 August 2012
DOI: 10.1177/1525822X12449711

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://fmx.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/07/24/1525822X12449711

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Field Methods* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://fmx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://fmx.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 31, 2012

What is This?

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

Field Methods
00(0) 1-9
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1525822X12449711
http://fm.sagepub.com
SAGE

Exit and Entrance Polling: A Comparison of Election Survey Methods

Casey A. Klofstad[1] and Benjamin G. Bishin[2]

Abstract

We report the results of an experiment in which voters participating in the 2008 presidential election were surveyed either as they exited their voting places (a traditional exit poll) or as they waited in line to vote (an "entrance poll"). To the best of our knowledge, the efficacy of entrance polling has not been studied previously. Our data show that the entrance poll, when compared to the exit poll, produced a significantly higher cooperation rate among voters and a significantly lower item nonresponse rate. In our discussion of these results, we examine the benefits and potential complications of entrance polling.

Keywords

exit poll, entrance poll, election survey, nonresponse, cooperation rate

[1] Department of Political Science, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, USA
[2] Department of Political Science, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Casey A. Klofstad, Department of Political Science, University of Miami, 5250 University Drive, Jenkins Building, Room 314-G, Coral Gables, FL 33146, USA
Email: klofstad@gmail.com

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

Introduction

The rate of voter cooperation in responding to exit polls has been in decline since the early 1990s (Blumenthal 2004; National Election Day Exit Poll 2006). Among the explanations for nonresponse, opportunity costs are at the top of the list as "the burden of providing the interview is larger for those who have little discretionary time" (Dillman et al. 2002:8; see also Crawford et al. 2001; McCarthy et al. 2006; Sharp and Frankel 1983). One way to reduce this burden would be to poll voters as they wait in line to vote—to conduct an "entrance" poll, rather than an "exit" poll. While exiting voters are motivated to resume their daily routines, those waiting to vote are a captive audience who may be more motivated to participate in the poll because they have the time to do so while they wait.

Based on this assumption, we hypothesize that an entrance poll will produce a higher cooperation rate and a lower item nonresponse rate than an exit poll. To test these hypotheses, we conducted an experiment in which voters participating in the 2008 presidential election were selected to be polled either as they exited their voting places or as they waited in line to vote. While scholarship exists on Election Day polling methodology (e.g., Busch and Lieske 1985; Freeman 2004; Levy 1983; Merkle and Edelman 2002; Mitofsky 1991), and while entrance polling has been conducted during the Iowa caucuses (Blumenthal 2007), to the best of our knowledge the efficacy of entrance polling has not been studied. Our data show that entrance polls produced a significantly higher cooperation rate and a significantly lower item nonresponse rate than exit polls.

Data and Method

Early voters in the 2008 presidential election in Miami-Dade County, Florida, were randomly selected to complete either an entrance poll or an exit poll. Early voting occurred at 20 sites in Miami-Dade County, at which any voter in the county could cast a ballot between October 20, 2008, and November 2, 2008. The experiment was conducted during November 1–2, 2008, at eight early voting locations. Places and times for conducting the voter interviews were selected at random. The questionnaire was self-administered and consisted of 53 questions printed on both sides of a legal-sized sheet of paper. Respondents completed the questionnaire in either English or Spanish. Each interviewer wore a custom T-shirt designed for the polling project, as well as a university identification card on a lanyard.

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

Following established practices, under our exit poll protocol interviewers approached every third person who exited the voting place. More specifically, after a refusal or successful initiation of an interview, the interviewer stepped away from the respondent, ignored the next two voters exiting the voting location, and then initiated contact with the third exiting voter. Interviewers conducting entrance polls followed the same protocol by recruiting every third person waiting in line to vote, starting from the end of the line. Interviewers worked in teams of two. During the first half of the polling shift, one interviewer conducted the entrance poll while the other conducted the exit poll. To help neutralize possible interviewer effects on respondent cooperation or questionnaire responses (studied by Groves and Couper [1998] and Merkle and Edelman [2002]), during the second half of the shift the interviewers switched polling duties. To further reduce the potential for bias in our findings, interviewers were not informed about our hypotheses that their work was testing. In total, contact was made with 261 exiting voters and 209 individuals waiting in line to vote. Fewer contacts were made for the entrance surveys because more of those voters participated, thereby reducing the remaining time available to pollsters for making additional contacts.

Results

Cooperation Rate

The cooperation rate of respondents was determined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Cooperation Rate 2 (COOP2), the sum of fully and partially completed interviews, divided by the total number of individuals contacted (AAPOR 2011). The entrance poll yielded a significantly higher COOP2 rate of 81.3% ($n = 170$ of the 209 contacts) compared to the exit poll COOP2 rate of 63.6% ($n = 166$ of the 261 contacts), a difference of 17.7% ($z = 4.40$, $p < .01$). Throughout this article, we use z-tests rather than t-tests because cooperation rates are proportions.

Item Nonresponse

As shown at the top of Table 1, entrance poll respondents left significantly fewer survey questions unanswered, compared to exit poll respondents. The remainder of Table 1 presents figures for each survey question in which the difference in nonresponse between entrance and exit poll respondents was statistically significant at a level lower than $p = .10$. Entrance poll respondents always supplied more complete information than exit poll respondents.

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

Table 1. Statistically Significant Differences in Item Nonresponse

	Exit Poll (%)	Entrance Poll (%)	Difference
Overall	8.9	6.0	–2.9% (.07)
By survey question			
Question 1: Gender	7.8	2.9	–4.9% (.05)
Question 5: Ethnicity	2.4	.0	–2.4% (.04)
Question 10: Civic participation	4.2	1.2	–3.0% (.09)
Question 13: Primary news media source	4.2	1.2	–3.0% (.09)
Question 17: Trust in government	3.6	.6	–3.0% (.06)
Question 35: Cuba sanctions	16.3	8.8	–7.4% (.04)
Question 36: Cuba travel ban	15.7	7.1	–8.6% (.01)
Question 37: Cuba remittances	18.1	9.4	–8.7% (.02)
Question 38: Cuban American political power	16.9	8.2	–8.7% (.02)
Question 39: Future of Cuba under Raul Castro	19.9	10.0	–9.9% (.01)
Question 40: Necessary Cuban reform	19.9	12.9	–7.0% (.08)
Question 41: View on legality of abortion	15.1	7.1	–8.0% (.02)
Question 45: Religious affiliation	10.8	5.3	–5.5% (.06)
Question 46: Religious service attendance	10.8	5.3	–5.5% (.06)
Question 47: Equal opportunity for African Americans	12.0	6.5	–5.5% (.08)
Question 49: Vote choice for House of Representatives	15.1	8.8	–6.3% (.07)

Note: *p* values from *z*-tests in parentheses.

Figure 1 presents the difference in the percentage of entrance and exit poll respondents who failed to answer each survey question, beginning with the first question on the left and ending with the last question on the right. For questions that have negative values, the entrance poll produced a lower item nonresponse rate than the exit poll. The data show that the disparity in nonresponse between entrance and exit poll respondents increased over the course of the survey. Differences in nonresponse disappeared at the very end of the questionnaire, however, when respondents were asked to report their presidential vote choice.

Vote Choice: Speculative Evidence of Improved Poll Accuracy

In total, 62.9% of exit poll respondents reported that they had voted for Barack Obama, compared to 66.0% of entrance poll respondents. While this difference is not statistically significant ($z = -0.56$, $p = .57$), the predicted vote from the entrance poll is closer to the actual vote share of 69.6% that

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

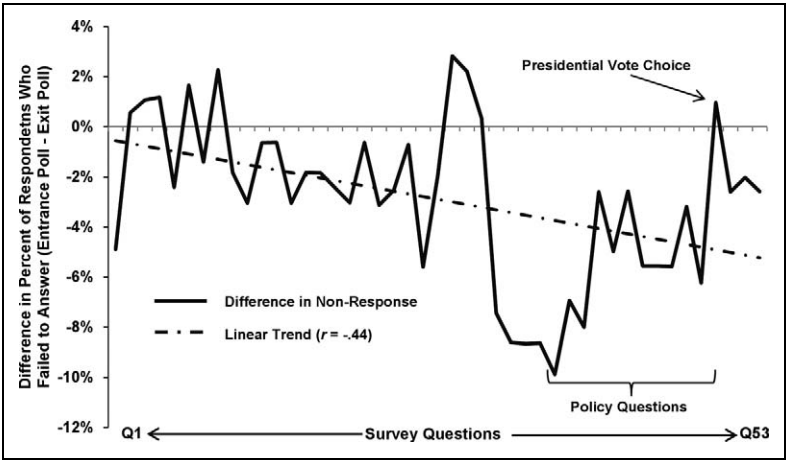

Figure 1. Item Nonresponse across the course of the questionnaire.
Note: The linear trend is statistically significant at $p \leq .01$.

Obama received among all early voters in Miami-Dade County. Moreover, when considering the actual early vote throughout the county as the null hypothesis, the entrance poll results are statistically indistinguishable from the early vote ($t = -.78$, $p < .22$). By contrast, the exit poll results are statistically distinct from the early county vote ($t = -1.60$, $p < .06$). However, these results should be interpreted with caution, given the small sample size as well as the unavailability of data needed to compare our results to the actual vote at the specific locations where we conducted the experiment.

Discussion and Conclusion

These results suggest that entrance polling holds promise as a method for improving Election Day surveys. Because entrance poll respondents are a captive audience, we hypothesized that individuals waiting in line would be more willing to participate in the poll and to fully complete our list of poll questions than exit poll respondents. We found this to be the case; the entrance poll produced a higher cooperation rate and a lower item nonresponse rate than the traditional exit poll.

Higher cooperation rates produced by entrance polls could increase the resources available to the survey researcher by lowering the cost per

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

completed survey; cost per complete survey is reduced owing to the shorter amount of time required to collect the required number of completed questionnaires per precinct. (Recall that our entrance pollsters made contact with fewer voters yet had a significantly higher cooperation rate.) If the resources that are saved through increased cooperation are used to increase the number of precincts sampled, coverage error is reduced and the sample size increased.

Our results also offer deeper insights into item nonresponse in election polls. As shown in Figure 1, reductions in item nonresponse due to entrance polling became larger as the respondent progressed through the questionnaire (also see Beatty and Herrmann 2002; Bradburn and Sudman 1991). Increased item nonresponsiveness by exit poll participants over the course of the questionnaire may have been a product of the interaction of respondent fatigue and question content. The largest drop in exit poll item responses occurred near the end of the poll when respondents were asked for their opinion on a number of policy issues, most of which pertained to foreign policy toward Cuba (see Table 1). Since only 34.6% of subjects in this study identified themselves as Cuban American, respondents with less available time to complete the questionnaire as they exited the polling place may have been more likely to leave these items unanswered out of a lack of interest in or knowledge about such matters (see Beatty and Herrmann 2002).

While there are potential benefits to entrance polling, there are also a number of issues that future researchers need to consider. First, our questionnaire was relatively long compared to standard exit polls. As such, future research should determine whether our findings are robust to alterations in the length of the questionnaire.

Second, although it is unlikely that the same voter would be recruited to participate in both the entrance and the exit polls, this potential complication cannot be discarded, especially since the lower exit poll cooperation rate could be driven by the fact that respondents already completed the entrance poll. This potential complication must be addressed during interviewer training.

Third, the benefits of entrance polling will be low in precincts without lines. This said, lines are most likely to occur in locations with high turnout, a condition frequently attributed to a competitive election. Therefore, to the extent that lines are more likely to occur in precincts where races are tighter, the increased sample sizes that could result from entrance polling will be concentrated in areas where larger sample sizes are most needed. If this is the case, our results suggest some broader normative implications.

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

A survey of news reports suggests that competitive precincts are most likely to be concentrated in large cities in the most competitive states. If the results from 2000 and 2004 are any indication, this is particularly true in places with high levels of minority registrants (e.g., Barreto et al. 2004). Consequently, the use of entrance polling may serve to include larger numbers of traditionally underrepresented voters into our samples.

Fourth, the fact that entrance poll respondents have not yet voted leaves open the possibility that respondents will leave before they get the chance to vote. Unless waiting times are excessive, however, the number of individuals who leave the line is likely to be low. If one assumes that the political preferences of those who choose to leave the line are not systematically different from those who actually vote, the effect of inadvertently including nonvoters in entrance poll results is likely to be small. For example, one would have to show that Republican voters are less patient than Democratic voters, or vice versa, if such a bias were to exist in entrance polling.

Fifth, entrance polling leaves open the possibility that respondents could change their vote choice during the time between completing the questionnaire and casting their ballot. However, if citizens are motivated to turn out to vote, it is likely that they have already decided who to vote for. Given that electioneering is not allowed in proximity to polling places, it seems unlikely that entrance poll respondents will change their vote. Assuming that the characteristics of vote switchers are not systematically different from respondents who do not switch their vote, the effect of vote switchers in the entrance poll results is likely to be small. This all said, researchers should be sensitive to priming effects by keeping the content of the entrance poll questionnaire as nonpartisan as possible (a best practice in legitimate surveys anyway).

Sixth, and as a corollary to the above, entrance polling might lead to priming effects whereby voters feel compelled to vote for the candidate that they selected on the questionnaire. The counterfactual is that if voters had not participated in the entrance poll they would have switched who they were going to vote for between the time of standing in line and casting a ballot. The "self-fulfilling prophecy" of priming effects would not affect the accuracy of the poll because the vote recorded by the poll would be the same as the actual vote cast. Moreover, it is difficult to envision people switching their votes between the relatively short time of standing in line and casting a ballot. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider whether such priming effects influence voter behavior. One way to address this issue is to make entrance polls as nonpartisan as possible.

Seventh, entrance polling could create potential problems in dealing with electioneering laws and election officials. In the course of our experiment,

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

we broke none of Florida's electioneering laws and faced no resistance from election officials. However, when we attempted to replicate our efforts during Election Day, our interviewers were turned away from the polls by election officials, although they were in full compliance with election law. This experience suggests that the efficacy of entrance polling is contingent on cooperative election officials.

Finally, it is important to question whether the results we observed in our early voting poll extend to Election Day voting as well as to jurisdictions other than Miami-Dade County. Given the potentially large benefits that may result from entrance polling owing to increased cooperation rates, this question should be addressed by replicating our experiment in other locations and for other situations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

Financial support for data collection was provided by the University of Miami Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies (ICCAS). The ICCAS had no role in the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

AAPOR. 2011. Standard definitions: Final disposition of case codes and outcome rates for surveys. www.aapor.org (accessed May 5, 2011).

Barreto, M. A., M. Marks, and N. Woods. 2004. Precinct quality and voter turnout: Race, income, and voter participation. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April.

Beatty, P., and D. Herrmann. 2002. To answer or not to answer: Decision processes related to survey item nonresponse. In *Survey nonresponse*, eds. R. M. Groves, D. A. Dillman, J. L. Eltinge, and R. J. A. Little, 71–86. New York: Wiley.

Blumenthal, M. 2004. The Freeman paper. Pollster.com (accessed March 10, 2009).

_____. 2007. Joe Lenski on the Iowa entrance poll. http://www.Pollster.com (accessed March 10, 2009).

Bradburn, N. M., and S. Sudman. 1991. The current status of questionnaire design. In *Measurement errors in surveys*, eds.P. P. Biemer, R. M. Groves, L. E. Lyberg, N. A. Mathiowetz, and S. Sudman, 29–40. New York: Wiley.

Busch, R. J., and J. A. Lieske. 1985. Does time of voting affect exit poll results? *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49:94–104.

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012

Crawford, S. D., M. P. Couper, and M. J. Lamias. 2001. Web surveys: Perceptions of burden. *Social Science Computer Review* 19:146–62.

Dillman, D. A., J. L. Eltinge, R. M. Groves, and R. J. A. Little. 2002. Survey nonresponse in design, data collection, and analysis. In *Survey nonresponse*, eds. R. M. Groves, D. A. Dillman, J. L. Eltinge, and R. J. A. Little, 3–26. New York: Wiley.

Freeman, S. F. 2004. The unexplained exit poll discrepancy. Research report from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate Division, School of Arts & Sciences Center for Organizational Dynamics. http://www.appliedresearch.us/sf/Documents/ExitPoll.pdf (accessed March 10, 2009).

Groves, R. A., and M. P. Couper. 1998. *Nonresponse in household interview surveys*. New York: Wiley.

Levy, M. R. 1983. The methodology and performance of election day polls. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47:54–67.

McCarthy, J. S., D. G. Beckler, and S. M. Qualey. 2006. An analysis of the relationship between survey burden and nonresponse: If we bother them more, are they less cooperative? *Journal of Official Statistics* 22:97–112.

Merkle, D. M., and M. Edelman. 2002. Nonresponse in exit polls: A comprehensive analysis. In *Survey nonresponse*, eds. R. M. Groves, D. A. Dillman, J. L. Eltinge, and R. J. A. Little, 243–58. New York: Wiley.

Mitofsky, W. J. 1991. A short history of exit polls. In *Polling and presidential election coverage*, eds. P. J. Lavrakas and J. K. Holley, 83–99. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

National Election Day Exit Poll. 2006. *National Election Day Exit Poll Codebook*. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu (accessed March 10, 2009).

Sharp, L. M., and J. Frankel. 1983. Respondent burden: A test of some common assumptions. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47:36–53.

Downloaded from fmx.sagepub.com at UNIV OF MIAMI on October 9, 2012