

Polls Were Accurate & Fair – My View

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Let's start with this – the presidential polls were incredibly accurate. And let's end with this – organizations and individuals that sponsor and conduct presidential polls bust their tails to be as fair as they can be – they have to, their jobs are on the line.

Several in the media have lamented the inaccuracy of presidential polls; others have suggested that polls must be biased or “fixed” because they were so inaccurate. An Australian journalist offered this diatribe, “All I wanted, I have to say, is a result that made the pollsters look stupid and it well exceeded my expectations in this respect.”

Well how accurate were the pollsters? The averages of all the national polls conducted within 3 days of the election projected a Bush popular vote margin of 1.5%. They missed the 3% winning margin by 1.5%! Out of over 113,000,000 votes, they missed by 1.5%!

Despite the difficulties in tracking cell phone only voters; despite the difficulties in tracking newly registered voters; despite the difficulties in determining who actually is going to vote; despite the difficulties in tracking voters who plan to vote via absentee ballots or who have already voted early; pollsters came within 1.5% of the actual vote!

On Wednesday, the day after the election, the media feasted on what they thought were inaccurate exit polls, those polls that allow the media to sound like experts on election night. The exit polls were incredibly accurate, calling nearly all states' voting patterns correctly. Some early-in-the-day (and therefore not representative) exit polling data were leaked to bloggers who, in an attempt to appear brilliant or clever, spread the inaccurate view that Kerry would win by 2% to 3% points. The exit polls were incredibly accurate; the bloggers got it wrong.

Finally, many in the media have openly questioned the integrity of researchers such as Gallup, Harris, Zogby, Rasmussen, Pew Research Center, and various universities, and even each others' media polls such as Newsweek, NY Times, ABC, etc. The criticism and accusations are all part of the game to sell airtime and space on the page. Polling organizations continually tweak their methods to ensure that their results are accurate as possible. Accuracy and integrity – that's what pollsters sell. Otherwise, they go out of business.

Do researchers ever get it wrong? Of course – polling is an art and a science. Think about trying to identify 1,000 people scattered across the country who are definitely going to vote and convince them to spend some time with you on the telephone at 7:30pm to tell you for whom they will vote and why? It's a daunting challenge – one on which the survey research industry has performed superbly.