



US ELECTION 2012

The 'Real' Final Numbers

Sir Robert Worcester takes a last look at which pollsters had it right and who had it a little off

There was an awful rush by the news media, the pundits and pollsters immediately following the American election last year to do the 'final' analysis even before all the votes were counted. This is perfectly normal, as that's what the public, at least the political chattering classes and their followers, want, expect and demand. Yet it's a chancy game.

Exit polls are useful, not just for which party is going to win and by how much, which lasts but a few hours on election night. They can be informative about who did what, in which states, and to some degree why. Post-election re-analysis such as that done over the years by MORI and this time as well by our American colleagues at Ipsos is also informative. This is done by aggregating pre-election polls asking voting intention – and other relevant questions relating to the election over the past months to the actual vote on election day and weighting every set of answers to that outcome to see 'what if'. While it isn't definitive, it can be an excellent guide to comparative sub-groups, to see who shifted their votes from one election to the next.

In the rush we published some preliminary data in which clever political addicts spotted errors; other data changed as late votes, including those of overseas Americans, were included in the count. The Editor agreed that when it was all down



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and dusted I should return to the election 'for the record' rather than for any elucidation which escaped our notice back in mid November. However, I take advantage of the opportunity to make a few points overlooked until now.

The table on page 43 tells what happened, where. Overwhelming as the sea of red in electoral maps of the USA are across the country, a state by state count shows that Governor Romney added two states to the Republican count from Senator McCain's efforts in 2008; Obama led in the number of states by 29 to 22 in 2008 over McCain, and in 2012 by 27 to 24, two switched to Romney,

Indiana and North Carolina.

First, the final result certified by the Congress on 4 January 2013 shows that on a turnout of 58.9%, slightly under the 2008 figure, just over 129 million eligible voters cast ballots in 2012, down some two million from 2008. Of these, nearly 66 million voted for President Obama and just under 61 million for Governor Romney, an overall majority of nearly five million; hardly the close contest the media mainly expected.

While the Republican candidate added nearly one million votes, and other candidates over half a million, the vote for the President's re-election fell by over three and a half million. Nonetheless, the President was re-elected, but by 51.1% of those voting to 47.2% for Romney and the other 1.7% to other candidates in the various states. This compared to 53.0% against 45.7% in 2008, a swing of 1.7% or just under two people in a hundred either switching their votes or staying home on election day. To compare these figures to pollsters' results, the convention is to round the share figures to the closest whole number. That gives us a 1.5% swing, one and a half persons who deserted the Democrat and supported the Republican in this election.

By setting out the states ranked by Romney's swing, it is obvious that he did well, just not well enough. Utah had the biggest swing to

Romney, explained mainly by the fact that Utah is the home of Mormonism, Romney's religion. Nearly ten more people in a hundred in Utah voted Republican this time, compared with 2008. Still, only a three percent swing followed Romney in Nevada, where the concentration of Mormons is second only to Utah's.

In only one state, Alaska, did the Obama/Biden ticket do markedly well, with a 3.5% swing against Romney and for Obama, but then former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin wasn't on the Republican ballot this time. Other states which bucked the trend, seen at the bottom of the chart, were the curious mixture of strong Democrat states New York and New Jersey, while Mississippi and Louisiana in the deepest of the deep South also tilted slightly to Obama, probably affected by a combination of Federal support following their floods and increased turnout in the black vote.

The Problem with the US Polls

In my view, the polls in the United States during this election did us all a disservice. This was compounded by the way much of the media dealt with them. At the outset I personally was frustrated by the way the pollsters reported their findings, not insisting on proper reporting, as we do in Britain, with a level playing field in methodology and transparency in reporting results. At the same time, many grateful thanks to the poll compilers, especially RealClearPolitics.com and FiveThirtyEight.com (Nate Silver in the *New York Times*), for prompt, accurate and comprehensive reportage of the many polls being conducted during the election campaign, both nationally and state by state.

The worst culprits in 2012 turned out to be the pollsters with the great-

est profiles during the campaign, Gallup and Rasmussen, the two principal 'trackers' which were reported almost daily, with respectable sample sizes, and a 'track record' (although Gallup was near the bottom of the league table in 2008). With such high visibility month in and month out, they consistently showed a closer race than was happening. Observing this early on caused me repeatedly to say forget the 'horse race', watch the key battleground states. I said from the beginning it would not be close where it mattered, in key states whose electoral votes would determine the outcome. Both Gallup and Rasmussen called the wrong winner in their final polls. Out of the 20 polling organisations which published eve of poll results, they tied for last place on any measure – out on the shares and out on the lead.

Now that we know precisely how many voted in the November 6th 2012 American Presidential Election, reported by the Federal Elections Commission and confirmed by Congress on January 4, 2012, we can calculate the 'league table' of American poll success in 'forecasting' the result. There are caveats of course, of late swing, allocation of 'don't knows', different methodologies, poor reporting, but as accurately and fairly as we can calculate it, Table 2 (page 44) presents the performance of the American polls in 2012.

Against the certified outcome of 51.1% for Obama, 47.2% for Romney and 1.7% for other candidates, rounded to 51%/47%/2%, against published figures at the time, the ABC News/Washington Post poll taken over 1-4 November by telephone among a national sample of 2,345 likely voters reported 51%/47%/1% with 1% don't knows. A most credible performance indeed,

I've always said that 95% of polling is skill, 5% luck, and any experienced poll watcher will confirm that any poll which comes 'close' is to be congratulated. Among those who are in the top tier as well are Angus Reid, Democracy Corps and Pew, all of whom deserve full credit for getting both the shares virtually spot on, and also the lead to within a point.

In the second tier, sample sizes spanned a huge gap between the relatively tiny IBD/TIPP sample of 712, projected, not so much a poll but what they published as their projection, and the massive 36,472 polled using their internet panel over four days by YouGov, both carrying out their projection of the result to one decimal point, but both well within the margin of error.

The Solution for the US Polls

Over 40 years ago the senior pollsters (before my time) led by Humphrey Taylor, agreed that since comparisons of their current poll results were made with the previous election's results, that the polls should also add up to 100%, which meant recalculating their poll findings to reallocate the don't knows and undecideds to put their results on the same basis as the election outcome.

This was especially important for the viewers of Dr David Butler (Nuffield College Oxford) and Professor Robert McKenzie (London School of Economics) on the BBC during the 1950s and 1960s, with their polished performances analysing the results of the polls as they tracked the election and the results as they became available. Early on they wanted the viewer to understand what they were telling them, interpreting the election with data instead of the spin that politicians previously filled the airways prior to the counts being announced.

Table 1: STATE-BY-STATE SWING ANALYSIS (Swing to Romney)

STATE	2008 USA Presidential Election Result				2012 USA Presidential Election Result				Romney Swing
	McCain	Obama	Other	ObLead	Romney	Obama	Other	ObLead	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Utah	63	34	3	-29	73	25	2	-48	9.5
West Virginia	56	43	1	-13	62	36	2	-26	6.5
Indiana	49	50	1	1	54	44	2	-10	5.5
North Dakota	53	45	2	-8	58	39	3	-19	5.5
Missouri	49	49	2	0	54	44	2	-10	5.0
Montana	50	47	3	-3	55	42	3	-13	5.0
South Dakota	53	45	2	-8	58	40	2	-18	5.0
Wyoming	65	33	2	-32	69	28	3	-41	4.5
Illinois	37	62	1	25	41	58	1	17	4.0
Wisconsin	42	56	2	14	46	52	2	6	4.0
Michigan	41	57	2	16	45	54	1	9	3.5
Nebraska	57	42	1	-15	60	38	2	-22	3.5
Delaware	37	62	1	25	40	59	1	19	3.0
Idaho	62	36	3	-26	65	33	2	-32	3.0
Kansas	57	41	2	-16	60	38	2	-22	3.0
Kentucky	57	41	1	-16	60	38	2	-22	3.0
Nevada	43	55	2	12	46	52	2	6	3.0
Pennsylvania	44	55	1	11	47	52	1	5	3.0
Tennessee	57	42	1	-15	60	39	1	-21	3.0
Connecticut	38	60	1	22	41	58	1	17	2.5
New Mexico	42	57	1	15	43	53	4	10	2.5
Oregon	40	57	3	17	42	54	4	12	2.5
Texas	55	44	1	-11	57	41	2	-16	2.5
Arkansas	59	39	2	-20	61	37	2	-24	2.0
Colorado	45	54	1	9	46	51	3	5	2.0
Iowa	44	54	1	10	46	52	2	6	2.0
Maine	40	58	1	18	41	56	3	15	1.5
Minnesota	43	54	3	11	45	53	2	8	1.5
New Hampshire	45	54	1	9	46	52	2	6	1.5
North Carolina	49	50	1	1	50	48	2	-2	1.5
Virginia	46	53	1	7	47	51	2	4	1.5
Alabama	60	39	0	-21	61	38	1	-23	1.0
Florida	48	51	0	3	49	50	1	1	1.0
Georgia	52	47	1	-5	53	46	1	-7	1.0
Hawaii	27	72	1	45	28	71	1	43	1.0
Massachusetts	36	62	2	26	37	61	2	24	1.0
Ohio	47	52	1	5	48	51	1	3	1.0
Oklahoma	66	34	0	-32	67	33	0	-34	1.0
South Carolina	54	45	1	-9	55	44	1	-11	1.0
California	37	61	2	24	37	60	3	23	0.5
Dist Columbia	7	92	1	85	7	91	2	84	0.5
Vermont	30	67	3	37	31	67	2	36	0.5
Washington	42	58	0	16	41	56	3	15	0.5
Arizona	54	45	1	-9	54	45	1	-9	0.0
Maryland	36	62	1	26	36	62	2	26	0.0
Rhode Island	35	63	2	28	35	63	2	28	0.0
Louisiana	59	40	1	-19	58	41	1	-17	-1.0
Mississippi	56	43	1	-13	55	44	1	-11	-1.0
New Jersey	42	57	1	15	41	58	1	17	-1.0
New York	36	62	2	26	35	63	2	28	-1.0
Alaska	59	38	2	-21	55	41	4	-14	-3.5
Total (Rounded %)	46	53	1	7	47	51	1	4	1.5
Total Vote %	45.7%	53.0%	1.3%	7.3%	47.7%	50.7%	1.6%	3.0%	
	59,934,814	69,456,897	1,687,559	8,645,538	994,338	-3,557,237	548,291	-3,675,030	
					60,929,152	65,899,660	2,235,850	4,970,508	© RMW

SOURCE: FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION REPORT, TURNOUT 58.9% OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS, CERTIFIED BY CONGRESS 4 JANUARY 2013

Table 2

FINAL POLLS 6.11.12 Poll/Organization	Foot-note	Sample Size n'	Fieldwork End Dates	Polls: Published Figures						Repercentaged Figures				
				Obama	Romney	Others	Don't Know	LEAD Obama	O+R vote	Obama	Romney	Lead	Obama Share Error	
				%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
ELECTION RESULT				51%	47%	2%	0%	4%	0%	52%	48%	4%	%	
ABC News/Washington Post		2,345	1-4 Nov	50	47	1	1	3	97	52%	48%	4%	-0.0%	
Angus Reid	3	1,019	1-3 Nov	51	48	1		3	99	52%	48%	4%	-0.0%	
Democracy Corps	c	1,080	1-4 Nov	49	45	1		4	94	52%	48%	4%	-0.0%	
Pew		2,709	31 Oct-3 Nov	50	47	3		3	97	52%	48%	4%	-0.0%	
Daily Kos/SEIU/PPP	4	1,300	1-4 Nov	50	48	0	2	2	98	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
IBD/TIPP	1, D	712	3-5 Nov	50.3	48.7	1		1.6	99	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
Ipsos/Reuters	3	4,725	1-5 Nov	48	46		4	2	94	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
NBC News/Wall Street Journal	A	1,475	1-3 Nov	48	47	2	3	1	95	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
PPP/Americans United for Change	4	1,200	2-4 Nov	50	48	0	3	2	98	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
Purple Strategies	2	1,000	31 Oct-1 Nov	47	46	0	7	1	93	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
UPI/CVoter		3,000	3-5 Nov	49	48			1	97	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
YouGov	3	36,472	31 Oct-3 Nov	48.5	46.5	2.3	2.7	2	95	51%	49%	2%	-1.0%	
American Research Group		1,200	2-4 Nov	49	49	1	1	0	98	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
CNN/ORC		693	2-4 Nov	49	49	2		0	98	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
Gravis Marketing	4	872	3-5 Nov	48	48	0	4	0	96	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
JZ Analytics/Newsmax	3	1,005	3-5 Nov	46.6	45.8	4	3.6	0.8	92.4	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
Monmouth University/Survey USA	2	1,417	1-4 Nov	48	48	2	2	0	96	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
Politico/GWU/Battleground	B	1,000	4-5 Nov	47	47	0	6	0	94	50%	50%	0%	-2.0%	
Gallup	1	2,551	1-4 Nov	49	50	1	0	-1	99	49%	51%	-2%	-3.0%	
Rasmussen Reports	4	1,500	3-5 Nov	48	49	3		-1	97	49%	51%	-2%	-3.0%	
AVERAGE				48.8	47.6	1.4		1.2	96.3	50.7%	49.3%	1.4%	-1.3%	
ELECTION RESULT			06-Nov	51%	47%	2%		4%		52%	48%	4%		
ELECTION RESULT Certified By Congress 4 Jan. 2013			06-Nov	51.1%	47.2%	1.7%		3.9%	Error	-1.3%	1.3%	-2.6%		
* +/-3% margin of error acceptable for c. 1,000 sample				65,899,660	60,929,152	2,235,850		4,970,508						
Turnout		58.9%	129,064,662											

ANALYSIS BY ROBERT WORCESTER, ROGER MORTIMORE AND TOMASZ MLUDZINSKI, IPSOS MORI

1 FINAL PROJECTION NOT RAW FINAL POLL, 2 MIXED METHODOLOGY, 3 INTERNET PANEL, 4 AUTOMATED TELEPHONE POLLS CONDUCTED BY: A HART/MCINTURFF, B TARRANCE/LAKE, C GREENBERGQUINLANROSLER, D TECHNOMETRICA

The 1970 election was the watershed. Up to that point, and in the case of Marplan even through 1979, the convention of distributing the undecided and don't knows was not uniformly observed. I recall broadcasting live on BBC TV during the 1979 elections and being faced with graphics which showed MORI with figures of (say) 45% for the Tories, 42% for Labour and 10% for the Liberals with 3% for other parties (totaling 100%), and an almost identical set of figures for Gallup. However, the third set of figures, from Marplan, showed 40% for Labour, 37% for Tories and 8% for Liberals and 2% others. The interviewer demanded to know why 'the polls are all over the place', dismissing the poll figures as nonsense. If Marplan's 14% undecideds and don't knows had been

proportionally distributed, the three polls would have all been in virtual alignment.

It is not that the undecideds and don't knows are unimportant. It is a valid response to the interviewers' question of respondents' voting intentions, and should always be reported. The British pollsters do not prescribe how the results are reallocated, although most British pollsters, for purposes of clarity and ease of understanding, merely distribute the percentage of those replying either undecided or don't know proportionally to those giving a voting intention.

Another convention among British poll reporting is that they (unlike many academics) rarely publish to a decimal point, suggesting to the casual reader a spurious accuracy to any opinion survey findings.

American media also seems wedded to reporting 'usual margin of error', without regard to sample size, methodology, or quality of the sampling design or empirical evidence. It stands to reason if (say) five independent opinion polls all are reporting similar results at the same time, the 'margin of error' would be much narrower than any one poll.

But at a minimum all polls should without fail report the basic technical details, dates of fieldwork, sample size, nature of the sample (all adults, registered voters, intending voters, whatever), methodology (face to face, telephone, internet) and name of polling organisation and sponsor of the poll. ★

Sir Robert Worcester is the founder of MORI. Follow him on Twitter: @RobertWorcester