

Review of “Internal Report of Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Polls During 2010, December 7, 2010”

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The internal report by Professors Jacobs and Miller touches on the most important issues involved in reviewing pre-election polls. A good portion of the review is given to general issues involved in the use and interpretation of any pre-election poll. This includes the reminder that polls generally represent the mindset of the voters only as of a particular point in time, and that all poll point estimates are accompanied by a margin of error. The specific recommendations developed in the review are all worth considering in future MPR/HHH polling endeavors.

The review touches on pre-election polling conducted by MPR/HHH during 2010. The major emphasis, however, is on the relationship between the final gubernatorial poll conducted October 21-25 and the outcome of the gubernatorial election. As the authors note, this poll had the Democratic candidate ahead of the Republican candidate by 12 points (41% to 29%, with 11% for a third party candidate, 16% undecided and 3% who refused to indicate their candidate support). The final election outcome found the Democratic candidate leading his Republican opponent by about .4%.

The authors begin by discussing what they term a misconception about survey research, namely that polls are predictions of election outcomes rather than snapshots of the voting intentions of the electorate at one particular point in time. The authors present the results of five polls conducted in the last month of the election. The spread in the Democratic lead across the five polls ranged from 0 to 12. The authors note that the SurveyUSA poll was the closest to the election and closest to the actual election outcome. At the same time, the MPR/HHH poll was the second closest to Election Day and reported the highest Democratic margin. Another poll conducted prior to the MPR/HHH poll showed a 3-point margin for the Democratic candidate.

The authors in essence argue that the accuracy of any poll conducted more than a few days before Election Day is unknowable, since there is no external validation of the actual voting intentions of the population at any time other than Election Day. This is true, but raises the broader question of the value of polls conducted prior to the final week of the Election – a discussion beyond the scope of the report or this review of the report.

The authors raise the issue of the impact of President Obama's visit to Minnesota on October 23rd. The authors note, and apparently reported when the poll was released, that interviews conducted October 24th and 25th as part of the MPR/HHH poll were more Democratic in voting intention than those conducted before the Obama visit. It is certainly true that "real world" events can affect the voting intentions of the electorate. In this instance, if the voting intentions of Minnesota voters were affected by the President's visit, the effect would apparently have been short-lived, given the final outcome of voting. The authors do not mention that the SurveyUSA poll also overlapped the Obama visit by at least one day. It is unclear from the report if there is other internal evidence in the survey that could be used to shed light on the Obama visit, including Obama job approval and 2008 presidential voting.

The authors recommend conducting at least one final poll close to the date of the Election to provide users of the poll with a final estimate of the likely outcome of the election. This is an excellent recommendation.

The authors discuss the fact that point estimates provided by a poll have margins of error around them. According to the author's "cautious" estimate of margins of error, the point estimates for the Democratic and Republican candidates come close to touching one another, meaning that the sample results could have been obtained even if voters in the population from which the data were sampled were actually close to being evenly split between the two candidates. It is unclear from the report how much the write-up of results from the October 21-25 MPR/HHH poll emphasized the margin of error range around the point estimates. Although this is not part of their recommendation, if the authors feel strongly that the margin of error around point estimates should be given more attention, future reports could include more emphasis on a band or range of estimated support, rather than the point estimates. This is generally not done in pre-election polling, under the assumption that the point estimate is still the most probable population parameter. Any education of the public on the meaning of margin of errors and ranges and comparisons of the margins of errors surrounding other polls is an admirable goal. It does, however, again raise the question of the purpose of and value of pre-election polls if they are used only to estimate broad ranges of where the population stands. This topic is beyond the scope of this review.

The authors present a time line of a number of gubernatorial polls conducted in Minnesota. The purpose of the chart is to show how similar the results are when margins of error are taken into account. The charts present only the point estimates for the Democratic and then the Republican candidate. It may be appropriate to look at other ways of summarizing polls for comparison, including the repercentaged gap; that is, the margin between the two candidates when the undecideds are removed from the equation and the percentages recalculated. There is a considerable literature on these and other procedures for comparing poll results with disparate undecided percentages.

The authors discuss the unusually large “undecided” percentage in the MPR/HHH poll – 16%, with another 3% who refused to name a candidate. The MPR/HHH questionnaire included in the report indicates that “undecideds” were asked for whom they lean. It is unclear from the report if these leaned percentages were included in the results released. Clearly the undecided component of the poll is smaller when leaners are included.

The authors raise the possibility of “house effects”, in which interviewers working at certain organizations are more or less likely to push for a candidate choice rather than accepting an initial “I’m not sure” from the respondent.

The authors discuss the implications of the fact that the MPR/HHH survey led with the ballot question immediately following introduction and screening questions. The authors recommend that in the future, MPR/HHH polls should include more “innocuous” questions prior to the ballot. This would be assumed to induce more comfort with making a candidate choice. This recommendation is testable in future research before it is implemented.

The possible impact of the unusually large percentage of undecideds in the MPR/HHH poll is dependent on assumptions about the ways in which those undecideds would “break” on Election Day. If the undecideds break for candidates in a way that is proportionate to the voting intentions of those who do make a choice, then the high level of undecideds would not affect the overall margin of support between candidates. This issue is not discussed in the report. There is some evidence that “undecideds break for the challenger” in races with an incumbent, under the assumption that an incumbent has all of the support he or she is going to receive initially. In this race, there was no incumbent. Some pollsters attempt to model the undecideds, analyzing their demographic and other characteristics in an effort to estimate if they appear more likely to vote for the Republican or Democratic candidate.

The authors raise the issue of disproportionate geographic representation in the sample. This is raised in the general context of weighting. The MPR/HHH survey, like most surveys, is weighted based on known Census parameters. The authors do not discuss the particulars of the weighting other than to say that it was reviewed and approved of by Professor Andrew Gelman at Columbia University.

The issue which appears most relevant is the authors’ indication that there was disproportionate interview “cooperation” in the 612 area code. The authors give the cooperation rate for 612 residents compared to the cooperation rate statewide. The assumption appears to be that this led to a disproportionately high concentration of voters in the sample from the 612 area code. A more relevant comparison would be the cooperation rate for 612 residents compared to all those contacted statewide in all area codes other than 612. Still more relevant would be a discussion of the actual proportion of all completed interviews in the final weighted sample that were conducted in the 612 area code (and other area codes) compared to the Census estimate of the proportion of the population of Minnesota living in the 612 area code, or the proportion of votes cast in a typical statewide election from the 612 area code, or the proportion of the initial sample in the 612 area code. These are typical calculations. The authors note that residents in the 612 area code can be expected, on average, to skew disproportionately for the Democratic candidate in a statewide race. An overrepresentation in the

sample of voters in the 612 area code could thus be expected to move the overall sample estimates in a Democratic direction.

The authors do not discuss the ways in which region was controlled in the survey process, if any. The authors make it clear that they did not weight the sample by region. This is commonly done in state polls, particularly in states where voting outcomes can vary significantly by region, as apparently is the case in Minnesota.

The authors recommend that future polls include geographic weighting, which is an excellent recommendation and would bring the MPR/HHH poll in line with other state polling.

The authors raise the issue of “interviewer effects” on the poll outcomes. They primarily focus on the fact that 44% of the interviewers for the MPR/HHH poll were minorities, “mostly African American”. The population of the state of Minnesota is approximately 5% African American, and the proportion of voters that is African American is often lower than their population representation. The authors state that there were no statistically significant differences in expressed support for candidates based on the race of interviewer. This is an important finding and could be elaborated on, given the high percentage of minority interviewers used in a largely white state. The actual impact of race of interviewer on survey outcomes is not well established in general, and can vary from survey question to survey question. In this situation, one hypothesis might be that minority interviewers achieved higher cooperation rates in areas with the highest minority concentration – presumably areas most inclined to vote Democratic. That hypothesis can be tested using available data.

The authors state that the candidate names were rotated randomly when respondents were read the ballot question, the usually accepted practice.

The authors discuss the fact that the MPR/HHH survey sampling frame did not include cell phones. Many national polls now do conduct a substantial percent of their interviews on cell phones, given that about 25% of Americans can be estimated to have only cell phones with no regular access to land line telephones. The authors point out that cell phone only households are in general less likely to vote and thus their exclusion from samples has less of an effect on voting estimates than it would on estimates of other population parameters. This is generally correct. The authors recommend that inclusion of cell phone only households be seriously considered in the future, which would put the MPR/HHH poll more in line with what is becoming usual practice.

The authors note, however, the important finding that cell phone only households typically can be estimated to be more Democratic in voting propensity than landline only households. This reflects the demographic characteristics of cell phone only households: younger, less well educated, less likely to own a house, and more minority. Given concerns that the MPR/HHH poll’s vote estimates were more Democratic than the election outcome, the authors correctly note that the exclusion of cell phone only households would in general have been expected to make the MPR/HHH sample more Republican in orientation – which was not the concern with this poll.

One area not discussed in detail by the authors is the impact of their procedure for screening for and estimating the vote preferences of likely voters, one of the most important elements in pre-election polling. The questionnaire indicates that voters were probed about their registered voter status and asked other questions related to their likelihood of voting. It is stated that the final vote estimates produced by the MPR/HHH poll were based on a group of likely voters. The details of this procedure are not discussed in the report. This is an important area of focus. Screens for likely voters typically produce a more Republican estimate than if all registered voters' vote intentions are taken into account – sometimes substantially so. This may have been particularly true this year in which national surveys indicated that Republican voters had an unusually high level of enthusiasm about voting compared to Democrats. Thus, it would be important to review the effectiveness of the likely voter procedures used by the MPR/HHH poll in isolating those voters more likely to vote on Election Day.

The authors devote a considerable amount of space in their review to the dangers of accepting any one poll as a) a precise point estimate of where the population of voters stands, or b) a prediction of what voters will do on Election Day. These points are well taken, and as noted previously lead to a broad discussion of the value of pre-election polls in general. Conducting larger polls and more frequent polls, perhaps including rolling averages of polls, is one way to avoid the pitfalls inherent in reporting the results of any one poll, which sometimes can inexplicably differ from other contemporaneous polls. Conducting polls closer to Election Day quite obviously gets around the problem of last minute changes in voting intentions. The authors in general discuss the need for more care in reporting poll results, which is an excellent recommendation.

The authors of this internal report review the aspects of the 2010 MPR/HHH gubernatorial polling most likely to have affected the reported results, with the exception of likely voter screens. The recommendations made by the authors are all well-founded. Many can be tested empirically before they are implemented.