

Exit Polls and Ethnic Diversity: How to Improve Estimates and Reduce Bias Among Minority Voters

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When political polling got its start the median voter was White, male, middle class, and civically-minded. Today, the voting public is incredibly diverse and growing weary of pollsters. Despite considerable demographic changes in the American electorate, it is unclear whether survey research and exit polling has kept up with the changes. The most recent data from the 2007 Current Population Survey point out that 34% of Americans are not White and in many states Whites are the minority. California is now just 43% White, New Mexico is 44%, and Texas is 47% White. These changing demographics have lead some scholars (Leal et al., 2005) to question whether the data and results of today's exit polls are correct and reflective of our multicultural society, or do they tend to over-represent the opinions of White, middle-class, suburban voters? Accurate exit poll data are important to policy makers, the media and scholarly researchers, all of whom attempt to understand what is on the voter's mind.

During the 2000 Presidential election, Voter News Service (VNS) exit polls stated that Al Gore had won Florida—in fact he lost. During the 2004 contest the new national exit poll which replaced VNS showed that George Bush lost the states of Ohio and New Mexico—two pivotal states that he actually won.

In addition to many state level exit poll results being skewed in 2004, comparative vote results for minority groups, such as Latino voters, also appeared to be off. The National Exit Poll (NEP) reported on November 2, 2004 that Bush won 45 percent of the Latino vote, increasing by 10 points from his support in 2000. In contrast, an exit poll of *only* Latino voters implemented by the Willie C. Velasquez Institute found that Bush won just 32 percent of the Latino vote. Further, a pre-election survey of Latinos by *The Washington Post* showed Bush garnering just 30 percent of the vote in late October (Leal et al., 2005).

What explains these differences? One possibility is the methodology used to select the precincts where exit poll interviews are conducted is faulty. The goal is that respondents in the exit poll survey are accurate representatives of the entire city or state in which the election is being held. However, if the exit poll interviews respondents that are too conservative or too liberal, too young or too old, too poor or too rich, it could skew the overall results by a non-trivial margin. Given the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of America's largest cities, the question might now be are exit poll surveys accurately representing White and minority voters?...

Racial Segregation in the United States

The United States is an increasingly racial and ethnically diverse country. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the increase in diversity across the country over the past twenty-five years has been accompanied by an increasing level of racial and ethnic segregation. Nowhere is the state of segregation in our country more telling than in the racial distribution characterizing our school system. While it remains true that diversity has increased in the public K-12 school system as a whole, by the year 2000 much of the Black-White desegregation accomplished since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) had essentially been reversed to 1970 levels (Orfield and Lee, 2006: 14). Grimmer is the

picture for Latinos who now hold the position of both the most racially and economically isolated group in our nation's public schools (Orfield and Lee, 2006: 10-11). The isolation of Black and Latino students in our schools can be traced to the racial and ethnic separation between neighborhoods.

Residential segregation is common and increasing throughout the United States. According to a study of racial segregation from the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, U.S. racial groups remain divided (Farley, 2001). The study provides a racial residential segregation index of dissimilarity, where a value of 0 is perfect integration and a value of 100 is extreme segregation. Table 1 lists for selected cities in 2000 the White-Black and White-Latino residential segregation scores. Seattle is included among some of the most segregated cities in our country, with a score of 69 for the degree of White-Black dissimilarity and a value of 51 in the comparison between Whites and Latinos. Moreover, patterns of racial group isolation show little sign of reversal. According to an analysis of Census data completed by the Harvard Civil Rights Project, racial residential segregation has increased from 1990 to 2000 in major metropolitan areas including Boston, Chicago and San Diego (Stuart, 2002; McArdle, 2003a; McArdle, 2003b). For each of these cities, comparisons of Census data in 1990 and 2000 reveal evidence of "White flight," suggesting that increasing levels of residential segregation are attributable to Whites moving out of central city communities and into the suburban neighborhoods of metropolitan areas, a pattern that geographers have documented in Seattle, as well (Guest, 2006)...

...In the next section we discuss an exit poll experiment conducted by the University of Washington in the Seattle-King County metropolitan area that compares results from a random sample of precincts to those from a racially stratified selection. In each of the samples, interviews were available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese in order to control for the importance of language of interview.

Table 1: Index of Racial Segregation by City, 2000

City	White-Black	White-Latino
New York	77	64
Los Angeles	77	71
Chicago	88	64
Houston	78	66
Philadelphia	82	70
Phoenix	63	63
San Diego	67	64
San Antonio	60	55
Dallas	75	69
Miami	86	51
Detroit	68	65
Washington	84	65
Boston	78	65
Denver	71	63
Seattle	69	51

Note: Value of 0 reflects pure integration and value of 100 reflects pure segregation
Source: Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, 2001

Methodology in the 2006 Seattle Study

Building on a pilot project conducted in Los Angeles during the 2005 mayoral election, we implemented a racially stratified homogenous precinct sample in an exit poll in King County, Washington during the 2006 midterm election. In order to assess the racially stratified approach, we simultaneously implemented a second exit poll in King County in which precincts were selected at random. Thus, we are able to compare the results of two exit poll sampling strategies to determine if they yield different results.

...Of course, it is not realistic to recruit 2,000 volunteers to staff each of the 1,000 precincts in a state like Washington. Thus, the key is picking a select number of precincts that accurately represent the full universe of 1,000 precincts throughout the state. Because a small number of precincts are chosen to represent the universe, if the “wrong” precincts are selected, the results may be biased. Therefore, exit poll research teams take considerable care to select precincts. However, their selection criteria can sometimes be flawed—one possible problem during the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections. For example, in 2004, only five majority-Latino precincts were included in the NEP survey and, as a result, most Latinos interviewed came from majority White neighborhoods and tended to be more acculturated and conservative (Gomez, 2004; Tolson, 2004).

The reality is that the great majority of voters do not live in racially integrated neighborhoods. Instead, most voters reside—and vote—in precincts that are racially homogenous. According to an analysis of geographic segregation by the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, King County racial groups, like much of America, are still very residentially divided (Farley, 2001; see also Logan, 2002).

Do Asian Americans who vote at International Terrace (precinct # SEA37-1825) in the International District/Chinatown, and have a population that is 56 percent Asian, differ from Asians who voted at a suburban precinct? What happens to the overall results if Asian voters at the International Terrace are excluded from the exit poll because that specific precinct is not selected in the sample? Similarly, questions may arise about African Americans who vote at the Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, which is majority-Black. Thus, a more accurate representation of racial and ethnic voters, and therefore the city at large, might be to conduct exit poll interviews in high concentration racial precincts (homogenous) and a mix of racially diverse precincts.

Sample 1: Racially Stratified Homogenous Precincts. In order to select precincts for the sample, we first obtained information about the White, Black, Latino, and Asian American voting age population within each of the 510 voting precincts in King County. We then sorted the precincts into five categories: heavily White; heavily Black; heavily Latino; heavily Asian; and racially mixed. Within each category we randomly selected precincts from the top quartile, i.e. racially homogenous. Because of the diversity within the Asian population, and because Asians are the largest minority group in King County, we selected two extra Asian precincts. The stratified homogenous approach has two major advantages over any other approach, in particular a random selection. The first is that it improves the actual sample selection by focusing on precincts where most minority voters live. Instead of picking up minority voters in the suburbs, this approach ensures the inclusion of minority voters in majority-minority precincts. Second, it increases the sample size of minority voters, thereby decreasing the margin of error on the subgroup voting estimates.

Table 2: Types of Precincts Included in Each Sample Method

Precinct Type	Distribution by Sample	
	Sample 1	Sample 2
Heavily White	6	20
Heavily Asian	8	5
Heavily Black	6	1
Heavily Latino	6	1
Racially Mixed	4	3
Total Precincts	30	30

Sample 2: Randomly Selected Precincts. The randomly selected precincts were picked without regard for the racial and ethnic composition within the precinct, and instead were chosen purely at random throughout the County. Theoretically, this method should provide a fairly accurate picture of the overall county. However, it will likely yield a much smaller number of interviews with minority voters and is more likely to pick up minority voters outside majority-minority precincts. The 30 precincts in the racially stratified homogenous approach and the 30 precincts selected in the random sample are detailed in Table 2.

For both sampling approaches, student researchers were recruited from the University of Washington, and a two-person team was assigned to each precinct. Voters were recruited as they left the voting precinct, using a traditional skip pattern to randomize which voters were selected. Those selected completed a self-administered survey using pen and paper. The surveys were available to voters in multiple languages¹, and the student researchers were appropriately assigned to precincts based on their language skills or race/ethnicity. The exit polls were conducted from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., the entire time that the polls were open in King County. Prior to the November 7, 2006 election, student researchers attended two training sessions on the exit poll project.

The Results: Does Precinct Select Matter?

In order to assess whether or not precinct selection impacts exit poll results, we present three levels of analysis. First, we compare the overall results for Sample 1 and Sample 2 for key questions to determine if the overall samples are yielding different frequency percentages. Second, we compare just the minority voters in Sample 1 to minority voters in Sample 2, to measure any potential differences in ideology, partisanship, and attitudes for non-Whites in majority-minority precincts and those in majority-White precincts. Since previous exit polls, such as during the 2004 Presidential election, have not conducted significant over samples in majority-minority precincts, they have tended to over-represent Black and Latino voters living in suburban White neighborhoods. Here, we are able to directly compare minorities in both majority-White and majority-minority precincts to determine whether or not statistically significant differences exist. Third, we conduct a similar comparison for White voters. Comparing results among Whites in Sample 1 and Sample 2 is important because Whites continue to make up a majority of the electorate, even in racially diverse cities and states. Thus, if there is significant variation in White responses by sample type, pollsters can make improvements in estimating White public opinion by including majority-minority precincts in their sample. Although such precincts are majority-minority and yield a large number of minority

¹ Surveys were available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Russian.

interviews, there are still a number of White voters in these areas whose opinion might be ignored if majority-minority precincts are not included in the sample.

Ideology and Partisanship. Arguably the most important individual characteristic that pollsters need to “get right” is the correct partisan and ideological balance of voters in the city or state they are sampling. While previous critiques of partisan imbalance have focused on interviewer effects (i.e., young people more successfully recruit liberals to take exit polls), we argue that precinct selection can dramatically alter the partisan and ideological affiliation of voters. Table 3 displays the results of self-reported political ideology and party affiliation among Whites and Minorities in both samples. Overall, comparing all voters in both samples, respondents in the racially stratified homogenous precinct approach are more liberal and more Democratic. While minority voters are consistently more liberal and more Democratic than Whites, White voters in the racially stratified sample appear to be considerably different than White voters picked up in the random sample. In the random sample 55 percent of Whites self-identify as Democrats, whereas nearly 70 percent of Whites in the stratified sample are Democrats. Among minorities, those in the random sample are more conservative (20%) than those in the stratified sample (14%) and also more likely to identify as Republican in the random sample. The data make clear that which precincts are selected in the exit poll sample can greatly impact the party and ideological balance of the voters. Not only is there a significant difference between the two polls, but we argue that the racially stratified sample is more accurate. According to records from the County Registrar of Voters, in the September 2006 election in King County, 68.3% of all voters were Democrats. In the racially stratified sample, 67.4% of all voters identified as Democrats, compared to 53.2% in the random sample—15 points lower than the known partisan balance of King County.

Table 4: Difference in Issue Importance by Sample Method

Most Important Issue	All Voters		Minority		White	
	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race
War in Iraq	53.6	61.8	58.7	50.8	54.1	66.3
Education	25.7	31.2	32.7	41.7	24.5	26.0
Environment	20.5	24.2	13.8	12.9	21.6	29.4
Ethics in Government	22.7	21.0	19.8	12.9	23.5	24.1
Jobs/Economy	17.2	18.2	21.2	26.0	16.3	14.6
National Security	15.8	9.1	13.9	11.3	15.8	8.1
Health Care	8.7	11.5	13.5	11.7	8.6	12.4
Taxes	13.1	10.3	9.9	16.7	13.2	8.1
War on Terror	9.0	4.0	7.1	1.4	9.0	5.0
Illegal Immigration	7.5	3.2	5.2	3.1	7.6	2.6
Gas Prices	2.9	3.3	1.9	7.3	2.6	1.8

Most Important Issue. The differences noted above are likely to have “trickle down” effects, given the importance of partisanship and ideology in explaining voter attitudes on issue and policy preference. Table 4 reports voter responses to the question, “what general issues were most important to you as you thought about how you would vote today,” and respondents could select two issues. Once again, the two sample designs yield different results overall, which hold for both minority and White voters. Across the board, the war in Iraq was listed as the most important issue. However, the degree varied by sample and race. White voters were more likely to list the war in Iraq in the stratified sample compared to the random sample, while minorities were less likely to list Iraq in the stratified sample. The tradeoff appears to be with minorities being more likely to list education as a top concern in the stratified sample—perhaps because schools in majority-minority neighborhoods are underperforming and under-funded. Similarly, minorities in the racially stratified sample were more likely to list jobs or the economy as a top issue. This suggests, beyond partisan affiliation or political ideology, voters in the racially homogenous precincts are facing different issues than voters randomly selected throughout the county, which could impact the results of an exit poll on a school bond measure or statewide initiatives on the environment or taxes.

Immigration and Discrimination. Finally, we examined results for a very specific set of issues related to immigration policy and discrimination against immigrants. The racially stratified samples are not only higher in their minority population, but significantly higher in their immigrant population, and proximity to immigrant communities. Given the national attention to immigration as an issue, and the numerous polls asking voters about their opinions of immigrants and immigration reform, it is important to examine the potential effects of sampling strategy on this issue. Table 5 displays results for two questions on our exit poll related to immigration. Voters were asked “regarding immigration policy, do you favor deportation, temporary guest worker program, pathway to earned citizenship, or no change in policy?” and were later asked, “do you think discrimination against immigrants is much of a problem in today’s society?” Among Whites, those in racially stratified sample were significantly more supportive of pathway to citizenship, 62% compared to 51% in the random sample. For

Table 3: Difference in Voter Ideology and Partisanship by Sample Method

Political ideology	All Voters		Minority		White	
	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race
Very liberal	22.8	36.3	22.3	22.0	23.5	42.6
Somewhat liberal	27.6	31.5	29.0	33.5	27.8	29.7
Moderate	25.5	20.3	28.6	30.2	25.2	16.6
Somewhat conservative	14.9	6.0	12.4	10.6	14.3	4.1
Very conservative	9.3	6.0	7.7	3.7	9.2	7.0
Party affiliation	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race
Democrat	53.2	67.4	66.0	69.4	55.1	69.7
Independent/Other	21.8	21.1	15.6	18.9	17.6	17.5
Republican	25.0	11.5	18.4	11.8	27.3	12.8

Table 5: Difference in Attitudes about Immigration by Sample Method

Immigration policy	All Voters		Minority		Latino		White	
	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race
Deportation	16.5	10.5	13.5	16.1	6.6	0.5	16.5	8.2
Guest worker	26.5	24.7	29.0	25.6	34.6	27.0	26.5	23.8
Path to citizenship	50.0	57.3	50.5	47.8	54.7	65.8	50.9	62.2
No change	3.0	4.3	3.6	7.0	4.1	3.0	2.9	3.5
Discrimination against immigrants?	All Voters		Minority		White			
	Random	Race	Random	Race	Random	Race		
Yes very much	24.0	39.3	34.8	47.0	23.8	37.4		
Yes somewhat	45.5	40.7	47.3	35.7	48.2	45.8		
Not really	25.1	16.8	16.4	17.3	26.7	16.5		

minority voters the relationship is less clear. Among all minorities—Black, Latino, Asian—those in the racially stratified sample were actually somewhat less supportive of pathway to citizenship. This is likely the result of anti-immigrant attitudes held by some African Americans, and found to be particularly strong in heavily Black neighborhoods (Doherty, 2006). Thus, we provide results for only Latinos, the group often referenced during the immigration debate and the results are much more clear. Latino voters in the stratified sample had higher rates of support for path to citizenship, 66% compared to 55% in the random sample. Further, virtually no Latino voters in the stratified sample favored deportation, compared to 7% in the random sample. Finally, with respect to discrimination against immigrants, noticeable differences emerge in the expected direction. Both White and minority voters were more likely to state that discrimination against immigrants is “very much” a problem.

Conclusions

The data clearly demonstrate that exit poll methodology matters. In particular, as pollsters grapple with how to best survey the increasingly diverse American electorate, precinct selection is an important concern. In this paper, we have outlined one possible alternative approach to exit polling in racially diverse settings, to ensure the representation of majority-minority precincts where a high percentage of minority voters reside. In addition to the aim to reduce survey error, each of these considerations also has in common the potential to lessen the burden on voters of participating in an exit poll. The resources that go into making an exit poll a success aren’t just drawn from a pollster’s budget, but also from the time and energy of each participant. However, making it easier for voters to actually participate in an exit poll doesn’t have to be costly for a pollster. As alternative methodology exit polls in Los Angeles and Seattle have demonstrated, it can be as easy as simply selecting heavily minority precincts or offering the exit poll in multiple languages. These kinds of quality touches are investments that promise returns, not only for any one particular exit poll, but will likely help in securing a more favorable public view of polling in general.

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