

National Council on Public Polls

Analysis Of

Final 2012 Pre-Election Polls

Since 1997, the National Council on Public Polls has published analyses of how closely national polls that were published matched the final official election returns in the race for President. Analyses of state polls on the races for U.S. Senate and governor were added in 2002.

These analyses have sparked controversy inside and outside of the polling profession. And such analyses are now done by a wide variety of those interested in survey research, from university professors to bloggers.

We strongly believe a poll's performance should be based on its overall reporting about the issues and the dynamics of a political campaign, and not on one number. We also believe reporting on the public's perception and preference for each of the candidates is important. We can only match the polls to voters' actual votes for the candidates at the end of the campaign, which is the topic of this review.

For the 2012 elections, here is the NCPP analysis of how the final national polls matched the election returns in the race for the White House, as well as an analysis of how state-level polls matched the presidential returns in that state and the returns in the statewide races for U.S. Senate and governor. Vote totals are now certified and final in all states.¹ NCPP expresses its thanks to Mark Blumenthal of HuffingtonPost.com, where much of the poll data was obtained.

This analysis covers 30 national and 404 state-level polls with all interviewing conducted October 17, 2012, or later (the 20 days leading up to Election Day). This is consistent with the analysis in 2010. In NCPP analyses prior to 2010, only polls mostly conducted roughly in the week before the election were included, on the assumption that the polls conducted closer to Election Day are more likely to reflect the final results than polls conducted before that time. Using this same criteria for 2012, there were 25 national polls and 270 state polls with at least some interviewing conducted Monday, October 29, 2010 or later. Using this cut-off does not imply any judgment about the quality or validity of the surveys. It simply matches past practice.

As in the past, a single poll in a state might contain questions about the race for President, U.S. Senate and governor. In such cases, the single poll is counted as three polls, one for each race covered.

In 2012, some pollsters conducted and released more than one survey in the time period covered by this analysis. In such cases, only the last poll in a state by the pollster is included in the analysis, in keeping with past practice.

National Polls

We present two ways to match the national polls with the national election returns.

¹ The final, official returns were received and verified at the end of 2012 and in the first days of 2013. The presidential and senate analyses changed slightly from those published earlier. The gubernatorial numbers did not change.

- Candidate Error: This is the traditional NCPP computation of how far the poll's estimate of the percentage-point difference between the two candidates is off from the actual percentage difference in the vote percentages for each candidate. The initial figure is then divided in half to give an estimate that can be applied to each candidate's percentage.
- Total Error: This computation compares the difference between each major party candidate's percentage in the poll and that same candidate's percentage of the actual vote.

In keeping with past analyses the 25 national presidential polls with interviews in the final week of the 2012 campaign and published at the end of the campaign came close to the election outcome. In terms of Candidate Error, the average is 1.46 percentage points.² In 2008, the same calculation reported an error of 0.9 percentage point. The NCPP analysis also showed a 0.9 percentage point error in 2004. In 2000, the average error was 1.1 percentage points.

In 2012, estimated Candidate Errors in the national polls ranged from 0.08 to 3.58 percentage points.

Looking at all 30 national polls with interviewing October 17 or after, the average Candidate Error is slightly higher: 1.65 percentage points. This analysis was not performed in 2008 on the national polls.

In terms of Total Error, the error by poll varied from 1 to 10 percentage points. *(The actual computations produced numbers from 0.9 percentage point to 10.3 percentage points. However, since the poll results are correctly reported only to the full percentage point, the error is as well. The actual vote is correctly computed to the hundredths of a percentage point.)* The final poll estimates for Barack Obama varied from 45% to 54%, with the final actual vote percentage now at 51.06%. For Mitt Romney, the poll estimates varied from 43% to 49%, with his almost-final vote percentage at 47.21%.

Of the 25 national polls in the last week, 16 showed Obama with a numeric lead, 7 showed an exact tie and two gave Romney a numeric lead. Many of the margins were less than twice the sampling error where a sampling error was reported, and most were with one times the sampling error. The average margin among all 25 polls was 1.6 percentage points, compared with the vote margin of 3.85 percentage points. The poll margins between the candidates varied from an 11 percentage point Obama margin to a 1 percentage point Romney margin.

State Polls

As has been the case since 2008, NCPP uses its traditional Candidate Error analysis for the state polls, a computation of how far the poll's estimate of the percentage-point difference between the two candidates is off from the actual percentage difference in the vote percentages for each candidate. The initial figure is then divided in half to give an estimate that can be applied to each candidate's percentage.

The state polls cover the races for President, U.S. Senate and governor.

Average Candidate Error for the 404 polls in 2012 was 1.97 percentage points overall. For polls with interviews conducted Oct. 29 or later, the average error is 1.93 percentage points. (For polls conducted starting Oct. 17, but not including interviewing Oct. 29 or after, the average error was

² In the earlier analysis based on nearly final results, the average error was 1.35 percentage points.

2.05 percentage points.) In 2008, the average error for the final state surveys was 1.8 percentage points.

The 404 state polls were distributed as follows: telephone polls using only human interviewers, 171 (42%); IVR polls, 126 (31%); Internet, 72 (18%); polls using a combination of IVR and human interviewers/internet, 33 (8%) and 2 mail polls. The major change from 2010 was the decline of the IVR polls from 41 percent in 2010 to 31 percent in 2012, which is partially explained by the transition by some IVR pollsters to a mixed mode in 2012.

For telephone surveys using live interviewers, the average error was 1.95 percentage points. It was 2.29 percentage points for IVR; 1.75 percentage points for Internet; and 1.41 percentage points for mixed mode.

There were 227 state polls on the presidential contest, 156 on U.S. Senate races and 21 on the governors' contests. The average Candidate Error in the state presidential polls was 1.64 percentage points; 2.4 points in the Senate races and 2.2 points in the governors' contests.

The state polls were closer to the final vote tallies in contests that ended up with margins of 5 percentage points or less between the winner and loser. In such close races, the average Candidate Error was 1.3 percentage points. In races where the winner's margin was greater than 5 percentage points, the average Candidate Error was 2.2 percentage points.

Here is a table summarizing the NCPP calculations from 2002 to 2012 on the state polls.

State Polls: Candidate Error 2002-2010				
<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of polls</u>	<u>Interview start dates</u>	<u>Election Day</u>	<u>Candidate Error</u>
2002				
	98	10/29/02	11/5/02	2.3%
	159	10/20/02		2.4%
2004				
	198	10/25/04	11/2/04	1.7%
	56	10/17-10/25/04		2.2%
2006				
	152	11/1/06 (End date)	11/7/06	2.0%
2008				
	236	10/27/08	11/4/08	1.8%
	507	10/15/08		2.0%
2010				
	202	10/24/10	11/2/10	2.1%
	295	10/13/10		2.4%
2012				
	270	10/29/12	11/6/12	1.9%
	134	10/17/12		2.0%

The NCPP analysis includes polls using a variety of polling methods. An individual poll can use a combination of methodologies.

- Live Interviewer Polls: In what were once called traditional telephone polls, a random sample of telephone numbers is dialed and a human interviewer reads the questions to the respondent and records the answers.
- Interactive Voice Response (IVR): In a pure IVR poll, a random sample of telephone numbers is dialed by computer and a recorded voice asks questions. Respondents enter their answers using the numeric key pad on their telephone.
 - In a mixed mode IVR survey, human interviewers either conduct some portion of the interview or some percentage of the total interviews, with the IVR process completing the remainder of the interview process or the other portion of the interviews.
- Internet polls: Internet polls included in this analysis are based on panels of people who have been recruited into an internet panel. A panel member is invited via email to participate in the survey. The panel member logs onto the survey website and completes the survey online. The recruitment of panel members and the selection of the panel members for a survey may or may not be random.

NCPP reports on the polls using these various methodologies because their results are widely available to the public. Their inclusion in this analysis is not an endorsement.

For the polls conducted via calls to telephone numbers, there are several possible types of sample designs:

- Landline only: Telephone numbers were drawn only from residential landline telephone numbers.
- Landline/Cell Phone: In addition to landline telephone numbers, calls were made to cell phones and interviews completed with those on cell phones.
- Landline/Cell Phone Only: In addition to landline telephone numbers, calls were made to cell phones and interviews were completed only with those who have a cell phone and have no landline telephone at home.
- RBS: Samples are drawn from registered voter databases and calls made to telephone numbers from those databases or numbers that have been matched to the database. These numbers can include both landline and cell phone numbers.

Computations

Candidate error reported here is one-half the error of the difference between the top two candidates. For example, if Sam Jones won the race by 55% to 45% over Joan Smith, Jones' margin is 10 percentage points. If a poll reported Jones leading 47% to 43%, a 4-percentage-point margin, the poll would be off by 6 percentage points, 10 points minus 4 points.

The candidate error is half of the 6 points, that is, a 3-point error for each candidate. This is because if 3 points were added to the poll estimate for Jones and 3 points subtracted from Smith, the difference would be 10 percentage points: the election margin. This error can be compared with the sampling margin of error for the poll. This is the method adopted by NCPP in 1997.

No method of judging the error works perfectly. Other evaluations of poll performance based on other methods may produce different conclusions. Other necessary components of good polling including rigorous methodology and a commitment to measure the full range of broader election issues and voter concerns are not part of this evaluation.

Most percentages reported for polls were whole numbers. For the few that had decimals, the results were rounded to whole numbers.