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# The Election Integrity Election Verification Exit Poll Methodology<sup>1</sup>

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November 7, 2008

## Preparation

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### Questionnaire design

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Unlike the National Election Pool media exit polls, which use a long questionnaire to give media material they wish to talk or write about, our questionnaire is short, in order to maximize participation rates and so as to not cloud our focus.

### Local Coordinator

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Every site has a Local Coordinator whose responsibilities include:

- a. Secure and establish a local base of operation
- b. Establish and manage relations with Election Board (EB) officials.
- c. Obtain information from the EB (see section below)
- d. Help choose precincts (see section below)
- e. Visit the chosen polling sites to ensure that (a) we know where it is and (b) that there are no serious problems, e.g., voters live in the building and thus never pass by the interviewer.
- f. Recruit, help train and schedule interviewers
- g. Recruit data entry people
- h. Put together Election Day kits
- i. Deal with any Election Day problems, e.g., interviewers are harassed or no shows, and call us with anything they cannot resolve.
- j. Manage data entry of exit poll survey results, and send them to us ASAP
- k. Ensure that official results<sup>3</sup> issued by the Board of Election are obtained, entered into a spreadsheet,

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the hundreds of donors who selflessly funded and supported this project.

<sup>2</sup> Write to Steve Freeman: sff at sas.upenn.edu or Ken Warren, warrenkf at stl.edu.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term **Official Results** for what are officially referred to as "unofficial results" and commonly referred to by the media and political scientists as **actual** vote or **actual** result or **vote count**. The last two are among the many misleading, or at least, leading, terms in election lexicon. I won't use the term **actual** because how people actually voted is precisely what's at issue. Likewise, **vote count** presumes that the votes are counted, which is likewise in question.

Unfortunately, **Official Results** has two meanings, neither of which has a good substitute. In one sense, the emphasis is on **results** – the final numbers that determine who will hold office and which go into the record books. In the other sense, the emphasis is on **official**, which is to say that they are derived from and have the sanction of, persons in office; and are authorized and supported by government institutions.

In the first sense, the official sense if you will, results are not actually "official" until they're certified some time well after the election. But in all cases these are results issued by government agencies, whose motives and actions are not always impartial. My solution is to use "official" as an adjective describing any numbers issued or acknowledged by the government as authoritative; when additional precision is needed, I'll distinguish between **unofficial results** or **preliminary official results** and **final official results**.

It's also important to specify from where the numbers are derived. In most cases, our numbers will come from directly from posts at the precinct by Board of Elections workers or from the county Board of Elections. Media reports may come

and sent to us ASAP

- l. Mail us the actual surveys or maintain them for at least two (2) years
- m. Be available for the month following the election in order to help track down any discrepancy or apparent error.

## **Local Base**

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Every site has a local base to serve as a:

- Meeting room for training
- Tables at which data entry people can work
- A high-speed internet connection
- Good telephone lines
- Easy access for meetings, to pick up Election Day kits, drop off data and get to polling sites

Typically, the local base is a college office or the home of the Local Coordinator.

## **Election Board Information**

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For each site, the following information was gathered:

- a. Past election results by precinct. This is necessary for both choosing precincts and conducting subsequent analysis.
- b. Most current voter registration list
- c. Regulations governing exit pollsters at polling places. For example, what is the law on how far back from polling place exit pollsters have to stand?
- d. Most current polling place listing with name of building (e.g., Dwight School), address, and precincts at that polling place.
- e. Map of the polling places or precinct map. Best is if there is a precinct map that also shows the location of the polling places. That is, all in one.
- f. Hours polling places are open on Election Day.
- g. Names and telephone numbers of election board officials (i.e., Head of the Election Board, Democratic Director of Elections, Republican Director of Elections). Names and contact information for other primary contact people at the Election Board.
- h. How to get official results as soon as possible (hopefully, shortly after the polls close on Election Day) for the precincts that we are polling. Or people to contact if official results are not forthcoming.
- i. Meet, and try to establish good working relations with Election Board officials.

We are in a delicate position with respect to election boards. We want to try to be on good terms with election officials. Election Boards have the power to make our work much easier or much more difficult, and we don't need more enemies. To ensure freedom to poll, we may ask for an authorization letter, which proved helpful in past polls.

We cannot comply, however, with demands to know what sites we are polling because such notification potentially undermines our efforts. We would need to challenge such a request. We would hope that the Board of Elections would understand the importance of our sites *not* being known in

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from separate tabulations from various sources. In 2000, Bush was named president by all the TV networks, Gore called Bush to concede and was minutes away from making a full concession speech, based on a false FOX-TV tabulation.

advance, but if not, we would have to pursue other options. This particular demand, like most other obstructions we will face, is unsupportable by law. Federal courts have asserted the right to unfettered exit polling in several cases, and this is often reflected in state statute as well. The NY Times, Associated Press and E/M have all faced and won lawsuits regarding the right to exit poll, and no one has ever lost (statutes are included in the appendix), but of course asserting one's rights does involve some costs.

## Choosing precincts / polling sites

We need to consider our intent carefully and precisely, but some general considerations apply:

### **Statistical and forensic considerations**

- Equal distribution of Rs and Ds provide greater information, including more statistical power. On the other hand, evidence indicates that fraud in 2004 was most extreme and blatant in the most heavily Republican precincts (Freeman & Bleifuss, 2006; Freeman & Mitteldorf, 2005).
- Larger polling sites are generally better: more data and statistical power. On the other hand, if we poll a high percentage of a site's voters, statistical power can be strong even in small precincts.
- Single precinct polling sites provide better data, but they are rare and becoming more rare still. Moreover fraud has been correlated with multiple precinct polling sites (Liddle 2006) and directly linked to them through ballot-switching procedures (Jacobs 2006).
- Variation in precinct partisanship, partisan control, voting technology, and socioeconomics
- What's at stake? Are important maverick candidates running whose election would or could threaten powerful interests?

One might include as a bullet point, "*Any reason to suspect fraud?*" But as one begins listing the reasons – Statistical or anecdotal evidence raising questions, generally corrupt political leadership, use of e-voting; or opacity in process, e.g., restrictions in observer access, obstructions in access to paper ballots if they exist, or reluctance to post official results quickly – it's clear that there is little reason for confidence in official results from the vast majority of jurisdictions across the country. Indeed, we may want to seek the few in which we *do* have confidence as control sites for our methodologies.

### **"Pollability" considerations**

- Proximity to Local Coordinator – permits help in resolving problems, allows for early data collection
- For important remote sites, ability to hire and train an interviewer.
- Protection from rain or snow? An indoor space is best, but hard to ensure.
- Can we cover all the exits? (one if we use only one interviewer)
- Accessibility: Are we permitted to poll there? Of course, if we're not or restrictions are placed, that's one more reason to suspect fraud (see above), but one nevertheless needs at least capable people and a plan for how to circumvent opposition.)

## Recruit, help train and schedule interviewers

Sources for recruitment include:

- University professors – especially those teaching government, criminal justice, statistics, or survey design classes
- EI/EDA newsletter
- Friends and relatives of early recruits and EI/EDA newsletter recipients
- Craigslist
- Viewers of Election related films.

Training consisted of compulsory attendance at a one hour session conducted by the authors or Angela Spies, a coordinator with whom both of us have previously worked. We also provide them with a handout of instructions.

Exchange information: We need to collect from them their names, cell phone numbers, email address, and any location/scheduling preferences. We need to provide them with various documents: authorization letter from EI, authorization letter from local elections officials, pertinent exit poll regulations, interviewing instructions<sup>a</sup> and cards with phone numbers to call.<sup>a</sup> We should also take some time to inform them about the work of EI and EDA.

## Data Entry Preparation

We provide instructions, e.g., 1="Yes"; 2= "No"; entry is done using *Notepad*, which is available on PCs along with Microsoft computer operating systems (under Accessories), is good.

## Election Day kits

We prepare an *Election Day kit* for each polling place:

- two exit poll boxes (The boxes used in 2008 said simply "Exit Poll.")
- three clipboards
- box of pencils (alt: attach a pen with string to the clipboard)
- lots of questionnaires <sup>a</sup>
- missed subject sheets <sup>a</sup>
- documents: authorization letter from *Election Integrity*, pertinent exit poll regulations, interviewing instructions <sup>ab</sup>
- cards with phone numbers to call <sup>ab</sup>

In addition, the following items may be provided:

- snacks,
- authorization letter from local elections officials (if we think it might be helpful)



## Election Day Operations

We divide the interviewing shift into two parts. Each shift has at least two interviewers.

### Morning shift interviewers

Interviewers arrive at the site at least 10 minutes before the polls open to find a suitable spot and set up. The Local Coordinator checks in with interviewers regarding any anomalies, unanswered questions, thoughts for improving poll process, or anything else they may have to say. Anything particularly important and urgent ought to be relayed immediately to HQ.

### Afternoon/evening shift interviewers

Interviewers should arrive at the site at least 10 minutes before they are scheduled to begin, in order to get the lay of the land from the morning interviewer(s).

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<sup>a</sup> see Appendix for example

<sup>b</sup> these are also given out in advance

At the end of the shift, interviewers should stay on-site to collect the official results, and, if possible, the tabulations from individual machines.

Provision must be made for direct delivery of remaining questionnaires and official numbers to base as soon as they are available.

The Local Coordinator should debrief interviewers regarding any anomalies, unanswered questions, thoughts for improving poll process, or anything else they may have to say. Anything particularly important and urgent ought to be relayed immediately to HQ.

## **Post Election Data Preparation**

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### **Data Entry**

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Typically, one person will write in Respondent #s (and Polling Site #s and CD#s if they're missing) for all the forms as they come in. **The most critical task is entering the correct Polling Site #.** All other errors could be caught upon going back for review, but if the wrong Polling Site # is entered, it will be undetectable. The other data entry people will immediately begin data entry.

Data is entered in the following form:

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05783381023111
05793181013112
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Each row represents one questionnaire and each column or set of columns a particular response to a particular question. In this case, the first four columns are Respondent #, the next column is polling site, followed by each of the questions in the questionnaire (we did not enter congressional district). "0" indicates a missing value; for example, both questionnaires do not have an answer to question #4 (If you answered "No", please give your reason). The first quality control is achieved by the fact that most errors result in row length being off. If that happens, the data entry person goes back and re-enters that questionnaire. The Local Coordinator (or Data Entry Supervisor if we have one) should not enter data, but rather ensure that data is entered correctly, making sure that Polling Site #s are properly identified and entered, and spot check some entries of each worker to ensure their entries are correct.

There are typically a few questionnaires with questionable entries, for example a respondent checks off two candidates for President. The data entry person and the Local Coordinator should make a decision as to respondent's intent or "0" (missing response) if they cannot do it, but also note these questionable entries and provide us with a log of them.

As soon as Data Entry is complete at the end of the day, the *Notepad* files should be sent to our programmer to produce SPSS and Excel files for analysis.

### **Collection of Official Election Results**

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Unbeknownst to 99.99% of Americans, obtaining precinct election results is anything but routine. At many jurisdictions around the country are incredibly nonchalant about ever providing these data, and it can easily take days, weeks, or even months just to find out what the votes were in a given precinct.

We could avoid the worst of these jurisdictions, but then these are precisely the jurisdictions with the most suspect results.

In many precincts, results are posted at the polling place as soon as possible after closing. In such cases, interviewers waited to obtain the results.

Where there was more than one machine, we tried to obtain the results for each machine at the precinct. Even if only precinct numbers are posted, it would be better to get actual machine counts.

## **Cleaning the Data**

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A programmer will convert the *Notepad* files to SPSS files. The first run is frequencies of each variable, and the first review is a quality control check. If there are any responses, for example, designated "3" or higher for a question with only 2 choices, it's clear that an error has been made and that questionnaire data must be reviewed and corrected in the SPSS file.

More thorough cleaning of the data, which may or may not be done on Election Night, is done through a variety of examinations including the following:

- List of Respondent records numerically ordered -- make sure there are no duplicate respondent #s or skipped respondents
- Respondents by polling sites -- any respondent # out of sequence indicates a possible data entry error
- Examination of striking *Within Precinct Disparities* (WPDs -- see below)

A programmer or analyst must systematically do this, probably over the telephone with the Local Coordinator for each area we poll.

## **Compilation and First Analyses**

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After cleaning the data, the following reports should be produced:

- a. Frequencies and percentages of each response to each question.
- b. *Within Precinct Disparity* (WPD) by polling place (PP)
- c. P(WPD) -- the likelihood or unlikelihood of such an outcome
- d. Cross-tabs on PP by all other variables.

We will have other cross-tabs we will want to run immediately depending on what we are looking for. In cases with striking data, such as more survey votes than official votes, or very large WPDs, we will want to go back and ensure that data was entered correctly.

## **Further Reading**

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Freeman, Steven F. (June 30, 2008) The Election Integrity Election Verification Exit Poll Report on the Kentucky Pilot Project [http://www.electionintegrity.org/documents/EI\\_Kentucky.pdf](http://www.electionintegrity.org/documents/EI_Kentucky.pdf)

Freeman, Steven F. (November 18, 2006) The Inaugural Election Integrity Election Verification Exit Poll Operations Report <http://www.electionintegrity.org/documents/PA2006.pdf>