

The Impact of Cell Phone Non-Coverage Bias on Polling in the 2004 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Despite concerns that the accuracy of pre-election telephone polls would be harmed by the omission of voters who could be reached only by cell phone, most national polls performed well in predicting President George W. Bush's reelection, and state polls were generally accurate as well. The national exit poll conducted by the National Election Pool found that 7% of election-day voters had cell phone service but no land line; younger voters were far more likely to be cell-only: 19% among those 18-24 and 20% among those 25-29. Within these two youngest age cohorts, cell-only voters were significantly more likely to be single and childless. While cell-only voters were more supportive of John Kerry than voters overall, they were similar to voters within their own age cohort. Because of this, pre-election telephone surveys that weighted their data appropriately by age were not significantly biased by the absence of the cell-only voters.

Among the many challenges faced by polling organizations in the 2004 elections, the newest and perhaps most frequently discussed was the growing number of people who relied solely on a cell phone for telephone service. Cell-phone-only (CPO) households could not be reached by most pollsters because major survey organizations do not include cell phone numbers in their telephone sampling frames for political polls. Given the fact that CPO households disproportionately include younger citizens, considerable speculation arose that their omission would create a bias in pre-election polls. Many believed that the polls might understate John Kerry's support, given his greater popularity among younger voters.¹ The potential danger of CPO households for the polls was discussed in at least 150 separate news stories in major newspapers, news magazines, or the broadcast media during the four weeks prior to the election.²

Despite these concerns, pre-election surveys performed well in forecasting the division of the vote. The average of several major national polls taken in the days leading up to the election showed President George W. Bush with a 1.5 percentage point advantage over Senator John Kerry, a slight understatement of Bush's actual margin of victory (2.4 percentage points). Of the major news organizations, only one forecast a Kerry victory. And although some individual state polls had significant forecasting errors, the average of polls conducted in each of eight key battleground states came within one percentage point of the actual results except in Florida (where the average of the polls was a Bush lead of +0.6% and he actually won by 5%).³ The

¹ For example, an ABC News/Washington Post poll released October 21, 2004 found Bush leading Kerry by 51% to 46% overall, but Kerry ahead among young voters (age 18-29) by 57% to 38%. And the Pew Research Center's final pre-election survey found 51% of likely voters under age 30 favoring John Kerry, with 45% favoring George W. Bush. Although younger voters exhibited considerable volatility in pre-election polls, in most polls they tended to be more pro-Kerry than the national average.

² This is likely to be a conservative estimate because a very tight search criterion was used. Major news sources were searched via Factiva using the keywords "cell phones" and "pollsters" and "polls."

³ Polling summaries can be found at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/bush_vs_kerry.html, accessed on March 19, 2005.

mean of polls within states showed no consistent bias in favor of either candidate, relative to the actual outcome.

No reliable national political polls of cell phone users were taken during the campaign and so we cannot know how these voters were reacting to the campaign and how they intended to vote. But because the National Election Pool (the organization created by the major television networks and the Associated Press to collect data on Election Day) included a question about telephone status on the national exit poll, we have evidence about the size, demographic composition, attitudes, and voting behavior of people in CPO households who voted in person on Election Day.⁴

The NEP Telephone Status Measure

On two of its four forms of the national exit poll questionnaire, the NEP included a single question asking respondents about the availability of telephone service in their home. A total of 5,619 voters responded to the question.

[Table 1 about here]

The NEP survey committee recognized the difficulty of measuring telephone service with a single question; the Current Population Survey uses a series of approximately 16 questions for this purpose. And owing to the lateness of the decision to include the question, there was no time for cognitive assessments or pre-testing of the question. Among the many concerns was the possibility that some voters may not have understood the difference between cellular telephones

⁴ The NEP exit poll is conducted with voters leaving polling places in a stratified probability sample of precincts across the U.S., and is supplemented with a telephone survey of voters who voted absentee or through early voting. The completion rate for the election-day exit survey is 52.8%. As described in the methods statement of NEP, “the respondents are weighted based on two factors. They are (1) the probability of selection of the precinct and the respondent within the precinct; (2) by the size and distribution of the best estimate of the vote within geographic sub-regions of the nation.” The weighting incorporates an age-sex-race non-response adjustment. For a full description of the NEP methodology, see <http://www.exit-poll.net/>.

and cordless telephones. And one insurmountable problem is that the measure of telephone status was available only for voters who voted in person on Election Day. Growing numbers of people vote early through the mail or at their local election offices; in 2004, an estimated 16% of the vote nationally was cast this way. These voters are represented in the NEP's poll by responses to a national telephone survey conducted in the days leading up to the election, which did not include CPO households.

Given these concerns about the NEP telephone status question, the marginal results from the exit poll comport reasonably well with other evidence about the size and makeup of the CPO population. Two other reliable estimates are available; both of them are from large, government-funded in-person surveys with very high response rates. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 6.7% of households are CPO, based on February and November 2004 administrations of the Current Population Survey (Tucker et al. 2005). The National Health Interview Survey estimated that 6.1% of households and 5.5% of adults were CPO during the last six months of 2004, with the rate having doubled over the previous 18 months (Blumberg et al., 2005).

Prevalence and Demographic Characteristics of CPOs

According to the exit poll, voters in CPO households differ in important ways demographically from voters who have landlines. They are younger, more likely to be unmarried, and less likely to have children. The BLS and NHIS surveys also find that they are significantly more likely to be renters. Table 2 shows the prevalence of CPO voters across different demographic groups in the sample.

[Table 2 about here]

About one-in-five voters under the age of 30 were CPO (19% among those 18-24 and 20% among those 25-29). CPO voter incidence drops off to only 7% (the average for all voters) among those in their 30s, and is 4% or less among those 40 and older. The relationship between CPO voter status and education and income is relatively modest, with somewhat greater incidence among the less educated and less affluent. Men were only slightly more likely than women to be CPO (8% vs. 6%, not significant), and differences by race were similarly small and non-significant (9% of Hispanics, vs. 7% each for blacks and whites).

Marital status is strongly associated with CPO status, with 14% of unmarried voters and only 3% of married voters relying solely a cell phone. Much but not all of this association is a result of age differences between married and unmarried people. Even among the young, marital status is still associated with CPO status. Among voters under 25, 15% of those who are married are CPO, compared with 19% among those who are unmarried. The gap is even wider for voters age 25-29. Eleven percent of married voters in this age group are CPO, compared with 27% of unmarried voters. Even among those over 30, the incidence of CPO is much higher among unmarried voters (9%) than among those who are married (2%).

Among voters of similar age and marital status, the absence of children under 18 living in the household is also associated with being CPO. Among married voters under 30, 8% of those with children are CPO, compared 17% of those with no children. The gap is similar among unmarried voters in their 30s: 8% with children are CPO; 19% without children are CPO.

These patterns demonstrate that CPO household status is heavily influenced by life cycle phenomena. Within the current telephony environment, CPO status is especially appealing to younger, single voters without children. The data indicate that for younger voters (and

presumably for all younger people) getting married or having children results in a much lower probability of living in a CPO household.

Presidential Vote and Cell Phone Status

As predicted by many observers prior to the election, significantly more CPO voters supported John Kerry than George W. Bush. According to the exit poll, CPO voters voted 54% for Kerry and 45% for Bush, compared with an overall 51%-48% margin in favor of Bush among the entire electorate. The difference between landline and CPO voters in support for Bush is significant at the .10 level. Not surprisingly given their lower levels of income, the relatively small number of voters with no telephone service were even more supportive of Kerry (he won among this group by 59% to 40%), but he also carried the somewhat larger group of voters who reported only a landline (52% Kerry, 48% Bush, not shown). But seven-in-ten voters had both a cell phone and a landline, and Bush had a 53% to 47% advantage among this group, offsetting Kerry's lead among the other groups.

[Table 3 about here]

Given the advantage that Kerry held among CPO voters and those with no telephone service, how did the pre-election polls do as well as they did in forecasting the vote? The answer is twofold. First, the absolute number of voters unreachable by conventional landline RDD telephone polls was relatively small (just 9% of all voters), and though different from voters with landlines, they were not different enough to seriously bias the estimates of RDD surveys. Taking the exit poll and simply excluding CPO and no-phone voters simulates the electorate that was available to RDD surveys.⁵ Even in this group, Bush's lead was only 1.3 percentage points larger

⁵ Note again the caveat that the exit poll sampling frame omitted approximately 16% of the voters – those who voted early or by absentee ballot

than in the electorate as a whole: 3.7 points compared with the 2.4 points by which he actually won the election. In a closer election, such a bias could lead to an inaccurate prediction of the outcome, but for any given poll in such a close race, neither candidate could be said to be ahead by a statistically significant amount.

A second reason that CPO voters (and non-phone voters) did not create serious biases in pre-election polls is that while CPO voters were more supportive of Kerry than the electorate as a whole, they were more similar to all voters *within their age cohorts*, especially among the younger groups where the incidence of CPO voters was the greatest. Among all voters age 18-29, Kerry led Bush by 56% to 42%. Among CPO voters, the margin was 58% to 41%. These differences were not statistically significant. The upshot of this pattern is that while approximately one-fifth of young voters were inaccessible to RDD surveys because of their CPO status, their exclusion resulted in very little bias in RDD surveys that used post-stratification weighting to ensure that this age group was appropriately represented in the sample. In other words, surveys that weighted their *unscreened* RDD sample (prior to reductions in the sample based on voter registration and likely voter status) to national parameters would have typically increased the weight of the younger RDD respondents in order to compensate for the missing one-fifth of this age group who could not be reached on a landline⁶; since the CPO voters were very similar to those with landlines, this weighting adjustment eliminated most of the bias that could occur from the under-representation of younger, more liberal voters.⁷

⁶ Weighting that accounted separately for ages 18-24 and those slightly older might improve the quality of the estimates because the Democratic advantage was greater for the younger group.

⁷ An important assumption underlying this assertion is that the likelihood of younger citizens turning out to vote was similar for CPOs and those with landlines. If CPOs were *more* likely to vote, the post-stratification adjustment would lead to an understatement of the size of the youth cohort among voters (though the magnitude of this bias would likely be modest). Alternatively, if CPOs were less likely to vote, the adjustment would lead to an overestimate of how many young people would vote.

Beyond the Vote: Party Identification, Ideology, and Attitudes

While the vote is the most important concern of pre-election pollsters, the omission of CPO households from any public opinion survey conducted with random digit dialing has the potential to produce a biased result in terms of other kinds of politically relevant attitudes and behaviors. Since the exit poll is by definition a survey of voters, we are limited to some extent in the breadth of generalizations we can make. For example, voters are typically more engaged in political life, more likely to participate in other ways, more apt to have opinions on important questions of the day, and more likely to have well constrained attitudes. But among voters, we can see the extent to which phone status is related to partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, opinions on certain issues, and the importance of certain issues in the vote choice.

[Table 4 about here]

As with the presidential vote, CPO voters appear somewhat different from all voters and those reachable by landlines. In the exit poll they are less Republican in partisan identification, more liberal, more likely to cite economic conditions as an important reason for their vote (both differences are significant at the .05 level), but very similar in terms of approval of the decision to go to war in Iraq. And as with presidential vote, most of these differences are associated with the demographics underlying telephone status, and most can be mitigated in RDD surveys through demographic weighting.

Conclusions

Despite concerns that the omission of CPO households from pre-election polls would produce biases in the estimates, the pre-election polls conducted by telephone performed reasonably well in the 2004 presidential election. Non-coverage has traditionally been a

relatively small source of the total survey error associated with election polling, since people without telephones are far less likely to vote. But as this paper and other research has shown, the CPO voter challenge is growing. Moreover, election polls – like all surveys – face growing levels of non-response, plus the particular challenges of election polling (most notably, the identification of likely voters).

In the 2004 election, the telephone polls were helped by the fact that CPO voters were still a relatively small segment of the electorate and that CPO voters were similar politically to others in their age groups. But CPO households are a growing percentage of the public, with estimates from the National Health Interview Survey indicating a growth rate of approximately four-tenths of a percentage point every six months for the past year and a half. If the exit poll estimate of 7.1 percent is correct and the trends documented by NHIS continue, CPO voters could constitute over 10 percent of the electorate in 2008. Indeed, if the current competitive environment in the wireless industry results in even more persuasive appeals to consumers to leave their landlines behind, the percentage of CPO households could be even larger.

But the analysis presented here suggests that the danger presented by CPO households to political polling remains relatively modest. It should be remembered that even among the young, unmarried, and highly mobile voter, the CPO household is not the norm. Moreover, while CPO status has great appeal to young and mobile people, these CPO voters thus far appear to be only slightly more liberal or Democratic in their orientation than others of their age and social characteristics. And marriage and parenthood bring a significantly higher likelihood of having a landline, even if a cell phone is retained. A reasonable inference from this fact is that people still believe a landline phone has important benefits – perhaps higher audio quality (especially where cell phone service is spotty), a single number for others to reach the household, access to dial-up

or DSL internet service, free incoming calls, reliable 911 service, and a central and reliable telephone for all households members to use. Until the telephone environment changes in ways that eliminate these advantages for the landline, the potential for the growth of CPO households may be limited. Consequently, the near-term threat to RDD election surveys posed by CPO households may also be modest except where the population of interest is young voters.

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Note: the 2004 NEP data were provided by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), which bears no responsibility for the analysis presented here.

Table 1: National Election Pool Question on Home Telephone Service

What type of telephone service is there in your home that you could use or be reached on?
(Check only one)

| | | |
|-------------|-------|---|
| 70.1% | (0.9) | Both regular land-line and cell phone service |
| 20.7% | (0.8) | Only regular, land-line phone service |
| 7.1% | (1.6) | Only cell phone service |
| <u>2.1%</u> | (0.3) | No telephone service at home |
| 100% | | |

Administered on the national exit poll conducted Nov. 2, 2004. N=5,619.

Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2: What type of telephone service is there in your home that you could use or be reached on?

| | Land-line phone | Only cell phone | | No telephone service | N of cases |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|----------------------|------------|
| Total | 90.8 | 7.1 (0.5) | | 2.1 | 5619 |
| 18-24 | 77.6 | 18.6 (2.2) | | 3.8 | 644 |
| 25-29 | 74.6 | 20.0 (2.5) | | 5.5 | 523 |
| 30-39 | 89.8 | 7.3 (1.1) | | 2.9 | 1126 |
| 40-44 | 93.7 | 4.5 (1.1) | | 1.9 | 670 |
| 45-49 | 95.4 | 4.0 (1.0) | | 0.6 | 729 |
| 50-59 | 94.6 | 4.5 (0.9) | | 0.9 | 1069 |
| 60-64 | 97.7 | 2.0 (1.1) | | 0.2 | 306 |
| 65-74 | 95.9 | 2.6 (1.1) | | 1.5 | 388 |
| 75 or over | 98.6 | 1.4 (1.4) | | | 148 |
| Did not finish high school | 84.5 | 10.4 (2.9) | | 5.1 | 219 |
| High school graduate | 88.8 | 8.1 (1.1) | | 3.1 | 1153 |
| Some college/assoc. degree | 91.5 | 6.5 (0.8) | | 2.0 | 1865 |
| College graduate | 90.6 | 7.8 (1.0) | | 1.5 | 1406 |
| Postgraduate study | 94.6 | 4.6 (1.0) | | 0.9 | 925 |
| Male | 89.5 | 8.2 (0.8) | | 2.3 | 2532 |
| Female | 91.9 | 6.1 (0.6) | | 1.9 | 3060 |
| White | 91.2 | 6.8 (0.5) | | 2.0 | 4316 |
| Black | 90.2 | 7.1 (1.4) | | 2.8 | 671 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 88.8 | 8.7 (1.9) | | 2.4 | 419 |
| Asian | 89.9 | 7.8 (4.4) | | 2.4 | 75 |
| Other | 90.3 | 7.6 (4.2) | | 2.1 | 80 |
| Under \$15,000 | 82.7 | 13.4 (2.5) | | 3.9 | 382 |
| \$15,000-\$29,999 | 83.8 | 13.6 (1.7) | | 2.6 | 791 |
| \$30,000-\$49,999 | 88.3 | 8.2 (1.1) | | 3.5 | 1209 |
| \$50,000-\$74,999 | 94.8 | 4.6 (0.8) | | 0.6 | 1257 |
| \$75,000-\$99,999 | 94.8 | 4.0 (1.0) | | 1.2 | 806 |
| \$100,000-\$149,999 | 94.7 | 4.0 (1.1) | | 1.4 | 607 |
| \$150,000-\$199,999 | 97.1 | 1.5 (1.2) | | 1.4 | 210 |
| \$200,000 or more | 94.5 | 4.6 (2.4) | | 0.9 | 155 |
| Married | 95.6 | 3.1 (0.4) | | 1.3 | 3451 |
| Not married | 82.9 | 13.7 (1.1) | | 3.4 | 2126 |
| Children under 18 in household? | 92.5 | 5.4 (0.7) | | 2.1 | 2319 |
| No children | 90.0 | 8.1 (0.7) | | 1.9 | 3272 |
| Age 18-24 | 70.5 | 15.5 (5.3) | | 14.0 | 93 |
| Married | | | | | 547 |
| Not married | 78.7 | 19.1 (2.4) | | 2.2 | |
| Age 25-29 | 86.3 | 11 (2.9) | | 2.7 | 230 |
| Married | | | | | 282 |
| Not married | 65.3 | 27.3 (3.8) | | 7.4 | |
| Age 30+ | 96.8 | 2.3 (0.4) | | 0.9 | 3122 |
| Married | | | | | 1293 |
| Not married | 87.8 | 9.4 (1.1) | | 2.8 | |

Source: election day exit poll conducted by National Election Pool, Nov. 2, 2004. Entries in parentheses are standard errors.

Table 3: In today's election for president, did you just vote for:

| | Total | Land-line phone | Only cell phone | No telephone service |
|------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| <i>All</i> | | | | |
| Kerry | 48.4 | 47.8 | 53.7 | 59.3 |
| Bush | 50.8 | 51.5 | 44.7 | 39.9 |
| Other | 0.8 | 0.7 | 1.6 | 0.8 |
| (N of cases) | 5788 (1.0) | 5029 (1.0) | 443 (3.4) | 121 (6.5) |
| <i>Age 18-29</i> | | | | |
| Kerry | 56.2 | 55.9 | 58.2 | 52.4 |
| Bush | 42.3 | 42.5 | 40.8 | 46.7 |
| Other | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.0 | 0.9 |
| (N of cases) | 1226 (2.1) | 882 (2.4) | 229 (4.7) | 51 (9.9) |
| <i>Age 30+</i> | | | | |
| Kerry | 46.4 | 46.2 | 49.0 | 63.8 |
| Bush | 52.9 | 53.2 | 48.8 | 35.4 |
| Other | 0.7 | 0.6 | 2.2 | 0.8 |
| (N of cases) | 4542 (1.1) | 4136 (1.1) | 212 (4.9) | 67 (8.7) |

Source: election day exit poll conducted by National Election Pool, Nov. 2, 2004. Entries in parentheses are standard errors for statistics with response distribution of 50%-50%. Differences between landline and cell-only respondents in Bush vote are significant at .10 level. All other comparisons between cell-only and landline voters are not significant.

Table 4: Party ID, Ideology, and Issues by Telephone Status

| | | Total | Land-line phone | Only cell phone | No telephone service |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Total | | 100 | 70 | 7 | 2 |
| Party ID | Democrat | 37.4 | 37.3 | 37.5 | 39.3 |
| | Republican | 37.9 | 38.5 | 32.2 | 31.3 |
| | Independent | 20.6 | 20.4 | 23.4 | 17.0 |
| | Other | 4.1 | 3.7 | 6.9 | 12.4 |
| Ideology | Liberal | 20.0 | 19.5 | 26.8 | 20.2 |
| | Moderate | 46.2 | 46.6 | 39.8 | 50.7 |
| | Conservative | 33.9 | 34.0 | 33.4 | 29.1 |
| Iraq war | Approve | 52.7 | 52.8 | 51.0 | 54.7 |
| | Disapprove | 47.3 | 47.2 | 49.0 | 45.3 |
| Most important issue | Taxes | 5.5 | 5.1 | 8.4 | 14.6 |
| | Education | 4.9 | 4.6 | 6.9 | 11.9 |
| | Iraq | 15.2 | 15.4 | 12.2 | 16.1 |
| | Terrorism | 21.1 | 21.5 | 16.7 | 19.2 |
| | Economy/Jobs | 21.5 | 21.1 | 26.7 | 19.5 |
| | Moral values | 23.5 | 24.0 | 21.1 | 9.0 |
| | Health care | 8.2 | 8.2 | 7.9 | 9.7 |
| Minimum sample size | | 5619 (1.0) | 3962 (1.2) | 446 (3.4) | 124 (6.4) |
| Age 18-29 | | | | | |
| Party ID | Democrat | 39.5 | 39.8 | 41.0 | 28.1 |
| | Republican | 33.7 | 34.2 | 30.5 | 38.9 |
| | Independent | 19.7 | 19.2 | 22.6 | 15.7 |
| | Other | 7.1 | 6.8 | 5.9 | 17.3 |
| Ideology | Liberal | 29.9 | 29.3 | 32.7 | 28.2 |
| | Moderate | 43.3 | 44.8 | 37.1 | 43.1 |
| | Conservative | 26.8 | 25.9 | 30.2 | 28.6 |
| Iraq war | Approve | 50.5 | 49.6 | 50.3 | 64.8 |
| | Disapprove | 49.5 | 50.4 | 49.7 | 35.2 |
| Most important issue | Taxes | 7.8 | 6.2 | 9.2 | 29.8 |
| | Education | 9.2 | 8.8 | 8.9 | 16.1 |
| | Iraq | 15.3 | 15.5 | 12.9 | 21.9 |
| | Terrorism | 16.3 | 16.4 | 17.4 | 10.2 |
| | Economy/Jobs | 21.9 | 22.3 | 23.1 | 8.4 |
| | Moral values | 24.1 | 25.7 | 20.7 | 10.0 |
| | Health care | 5.5 | 5.1 | 7.8 | 3.5 |
| Minimum sample size | | 1167 (2.1) | 747 (2.6) | 230 (4.7) | 52 (9.9) |

**(Table 4
continued)**

Age 30 +

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| Party ID | Democrat | 36.9 | 36.9 | 34.3 | 44.2 |
| | Republican | 38.9 | 39.3 | 33.5 | 27.6 |
| | Independent | 20.8 | 20.7 | 24.3 | 18.6 |
| | Other | 3.4 | 3.1 | 7.9 | 9.6 |
| Ideology | Liberal | 17.8 | 17.7 | 21.7 | 15.8 |
| | Moderate | 46.8 | 46.9 | 42.1 | 53.6 |
| | Conservative | 35.4 | 35.4 | 36.2 | 30.6 |
| Iraq war | Approve | 53.2 | 53.3 | 51.6 | 51.5 |
| | Disapprove | 46.8 | 46.7 | 48.4 | 48.5 |
| Most important issue | Taxes | 4.9 | 4.8 | 7.1 | 4.6 |
| | Education | 4.0 | 3.9 | 5.2 | 9.6 |
| | Iraq | 15.3 | 15.5 | 11.6 | 12.8 |
| | Terrorism | 22.2 | 22.5 | 16.3 | 21.7 |
| | Economy/Jobs | 21.5 | 20.9 | 30.4 | 28.1 |
| | Moral values | 23.4 | 23.7 | 21.7 | 8.7 |
| | Health care | 8.7 | 8.7 | 7.7 | 14.4 |
| Minimum sample size | | 4436 (1.1) | 3207 (1.3) | 214 (4.9) | 69 (8.6) |

Source: election day exit poll conducted by National Election Pool, Nov. 2, 2004. Entries in parentheses are standard errors for statistics with response distribution of 50%-50%.