TRANSPARENCY AND PRE-ELECTION POLLS

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Why the 2008 Cycle Is So Important to Political Scientists and Survey Methodologists

First truly open contest since 1952

Unexpected real world events impinge during the general election campaign

New forms of data collection, analysis, and dissemination

Pre-nomination contest runs the full cycle on the Democratic side

Public financing system near collapse, very large sums of money spent

Accuracy of the 2008 General Election Polls

	OBAMA	MCCAIN	*A*	SAMPLE DESIGN
Election Result	52.9	45.7		
FOX News	50	43	0.00	Landline Telephone RDD
Ipsos McClatchy	53	46	0.00	Landline and Cell Telephone RDD
CNN/ORC	53	46	0.00	Landline Telephone RDD
American Research Group	53	45	0.02	Landline Telephone RDD
IBD/TIPP	52	44	0.02	Landline Telephone RDD
Harris Interactive	52	44	0.02	Opt-in Internet Panel
YouGov/Polimetrix	51	45	-0.02	Opt-in Internet Panel
Pew Research Center	52	46	-0.02	Landline and Cell Telephone RDD
Rasmussen	52	46	-0.02	Landline Telephone RDD
NBC/WSJ	51	43	0.02	Landline and Cell Telephone RDD
GWU (Lake/Tarrance)	49	44	-0.04	Landline Telephone RDD
ABC/Washington Post	53	44	0.04	Landline and Cell Telephone RDD
GQR/Democracy Corps*	53	44	0.04	Landline RDD / Multi-Mode*
Diageo/Hotline	50	45	-0.04	Landline Telephone RDD
Research 2000	51	46	-0.04	Landline Telephone RDD
Marist College	52	43	0.04	Landline Telephone RDD
CBS/New York Times Telephone RDD	51	42	0.05	Landline and Cell
Gallup	55	44	0.08	Landline and Cell Telephone RDD
Zogby	54	43	0.08	Landline Telephone RDD
Average Value			0.012	
Average Absolute Value			0.031	

What Could Explain This Good Showing?

Polling methods have improved over time

The outcome was relatively decisive in terms of recent history (Obama wins by 7.2 percentage points)

Anti-Bush feelings and the desire for "change" (and its consequences for party identification)

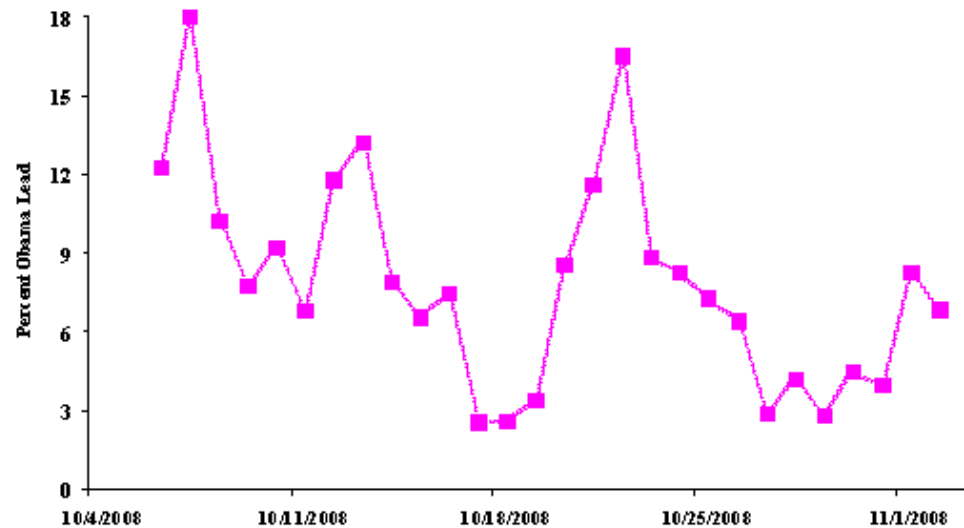The quality of the candidates and their campaigns
* General attractiveness of Obama as he became known
* Positions on the issues
* Debate performances
* Level of financing

One Discussion Topic: Convergence of the Estimates Late in the Campaign (Daily Data)

OCT 4 – NOV 2, 2008
VARIANCE IN OBAMA'S LEAD OVER MCCAIN
Compared by 8 *Daily* Tracking Polls

Debates on Oct. 2 (VP), 7, 15

What Could Explain This?

Crystallization of opinion (preferences) takes time

Larger sample sizes in later polls

Greater attention to methods generally as final estimates approach

Pollster sensitivity to estimates from other polls ("finger in the wind")

Problems with the Pre-Primary Polls

In New Hampshire, 13 pre-election estimates in the Democratic primary suggested Barack Obama would win by varying amounts, while Hillary Clinton won by 3 percentage points. Polls estimated Obama's proportion well but underestimated Clinton's.

On the Republican side, 11 out of 12 pre-election estimates suggested John McCain would best Mitt Romney, and he did.

There was a great deal of commentary in the press, and AAPOR appointed an 11-person committee to investigate what went wrong. The image of the polling industry is linked to how well pre-election polls do in estimating outcomes, a real world validation.

What Factors Could Explain Problems in the Early Primaries?

The fields were large because there was an "open" contest with no incumbent, first time since 1952.

Candidates remained relatively unknown depending on their level of campaign activity (i.e., Bill Richardson / Rudy Giuliani or Fred Thompson)

Party identification is an insufficient cue for primary voters because these are within party events.

Rules of the game vary from state to state; New Hampshire has a partially "open" contest.
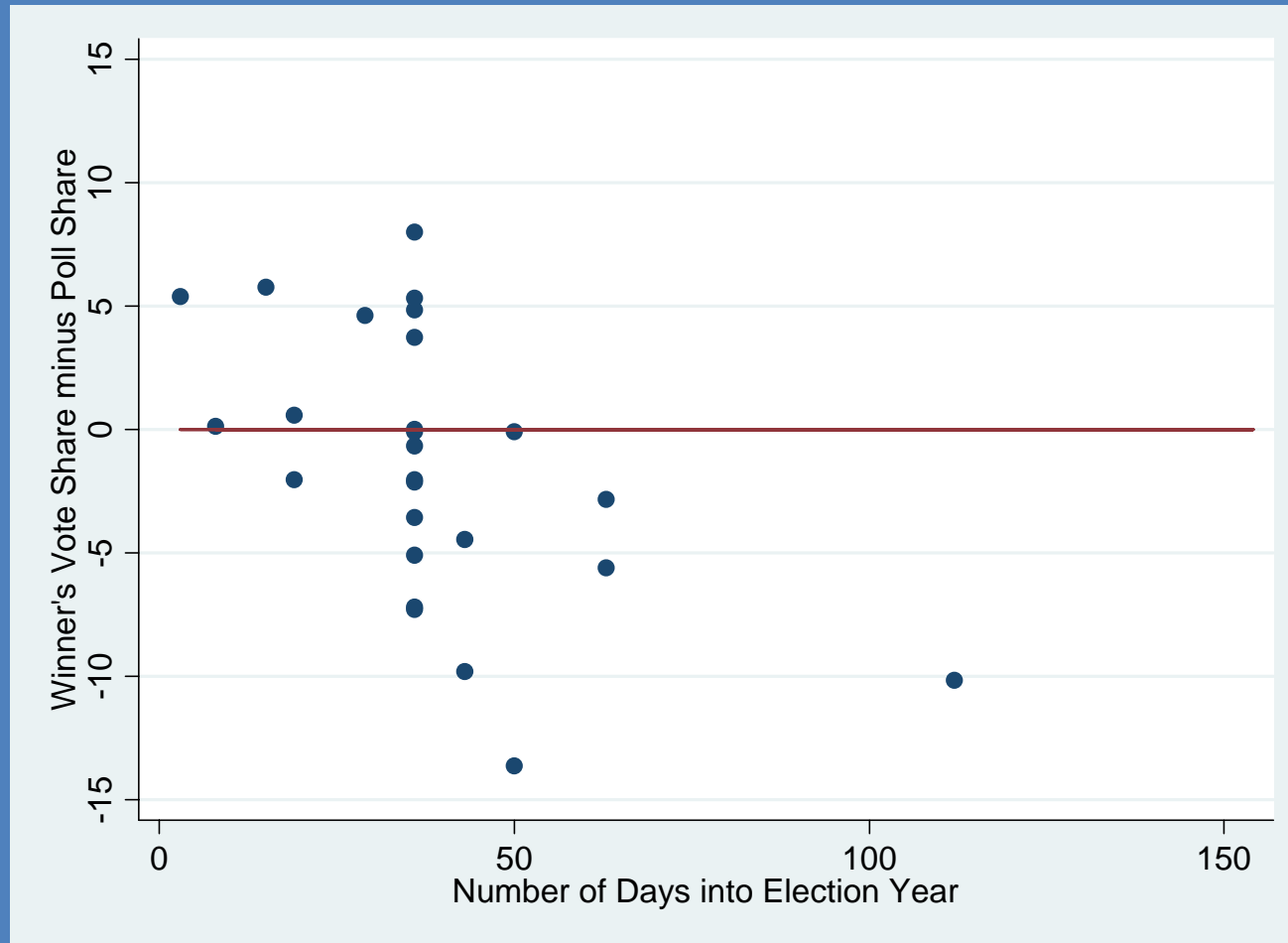
Turnout is often low, much lower than in general elections.

In the Aggregate: Pre-Primary Poll Performance Across All the Democratic Contests in 2008
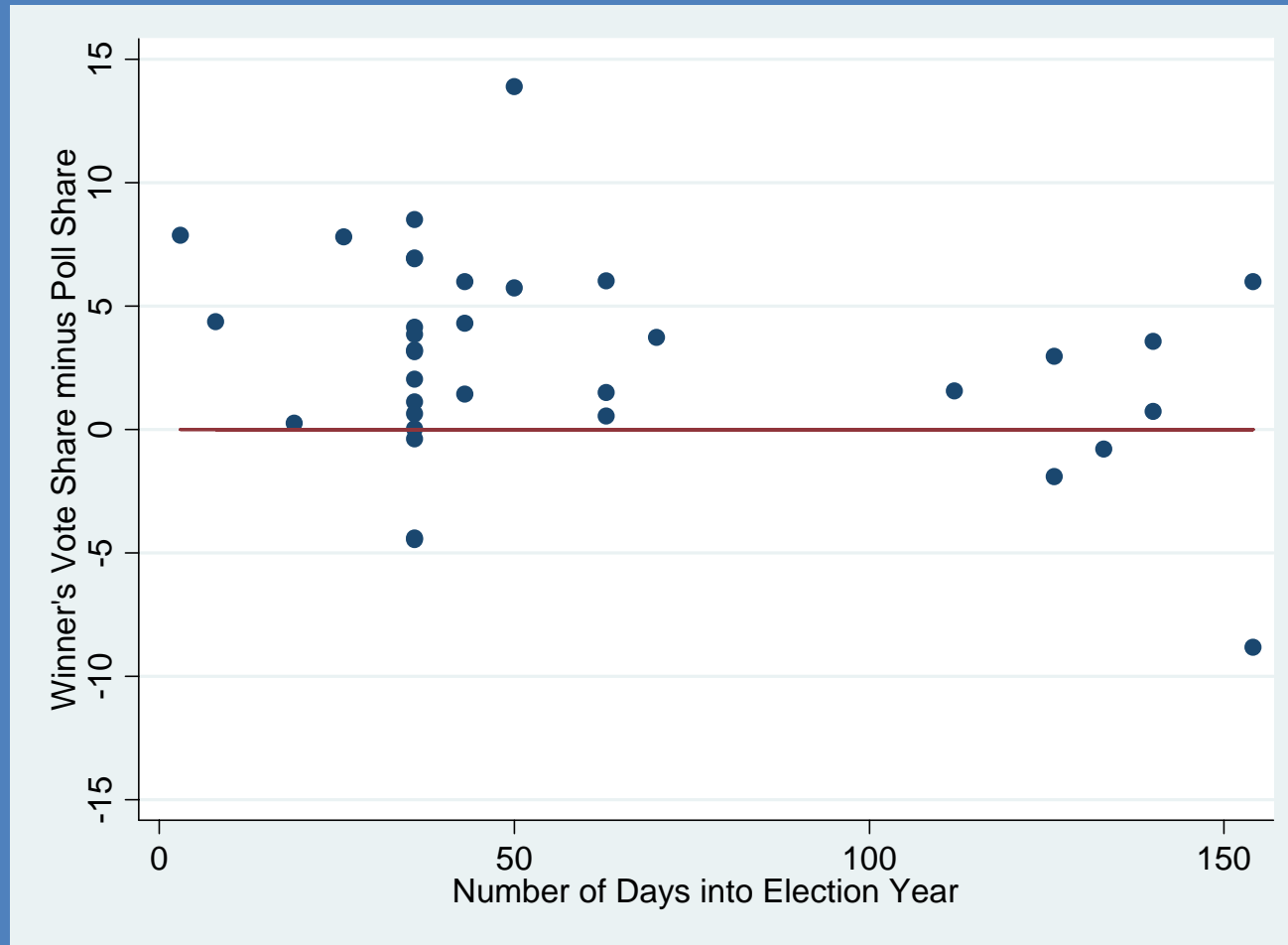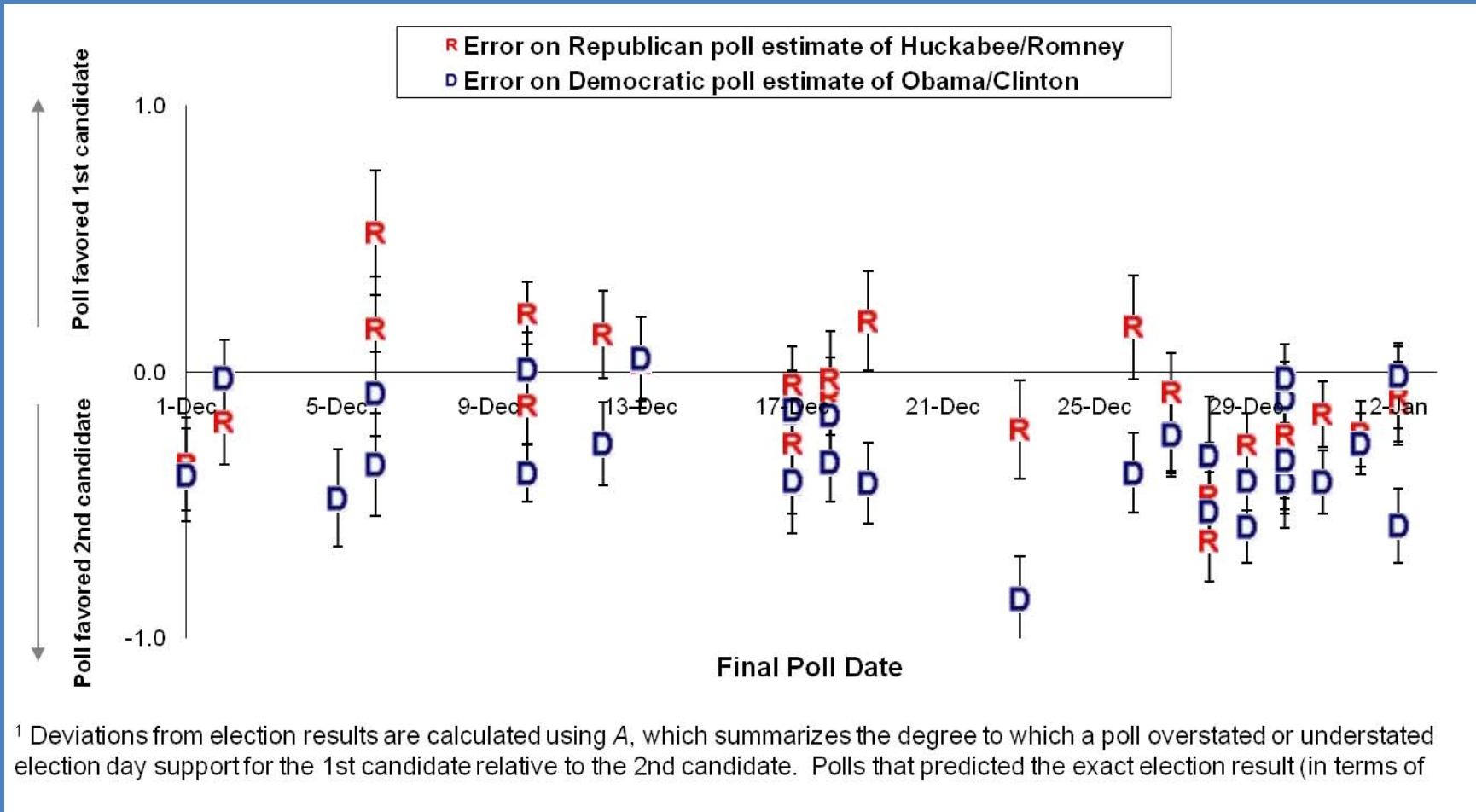
In the Aggregate: Pre-Primary Poll Performance Across All the Republican Contests in 2008

2008 Iowa Caucus Polls' Deviations from the Election Results

¹ Deviations from election results are calculated using A, which summarizes the degree to which a poll overstated or understated election day support for the 1st candidate relative to the 2nd candidate. Polls that predicted the exact election result (in terms of

2008 New Hampshire Primary Polls' Deviations from the Election Results
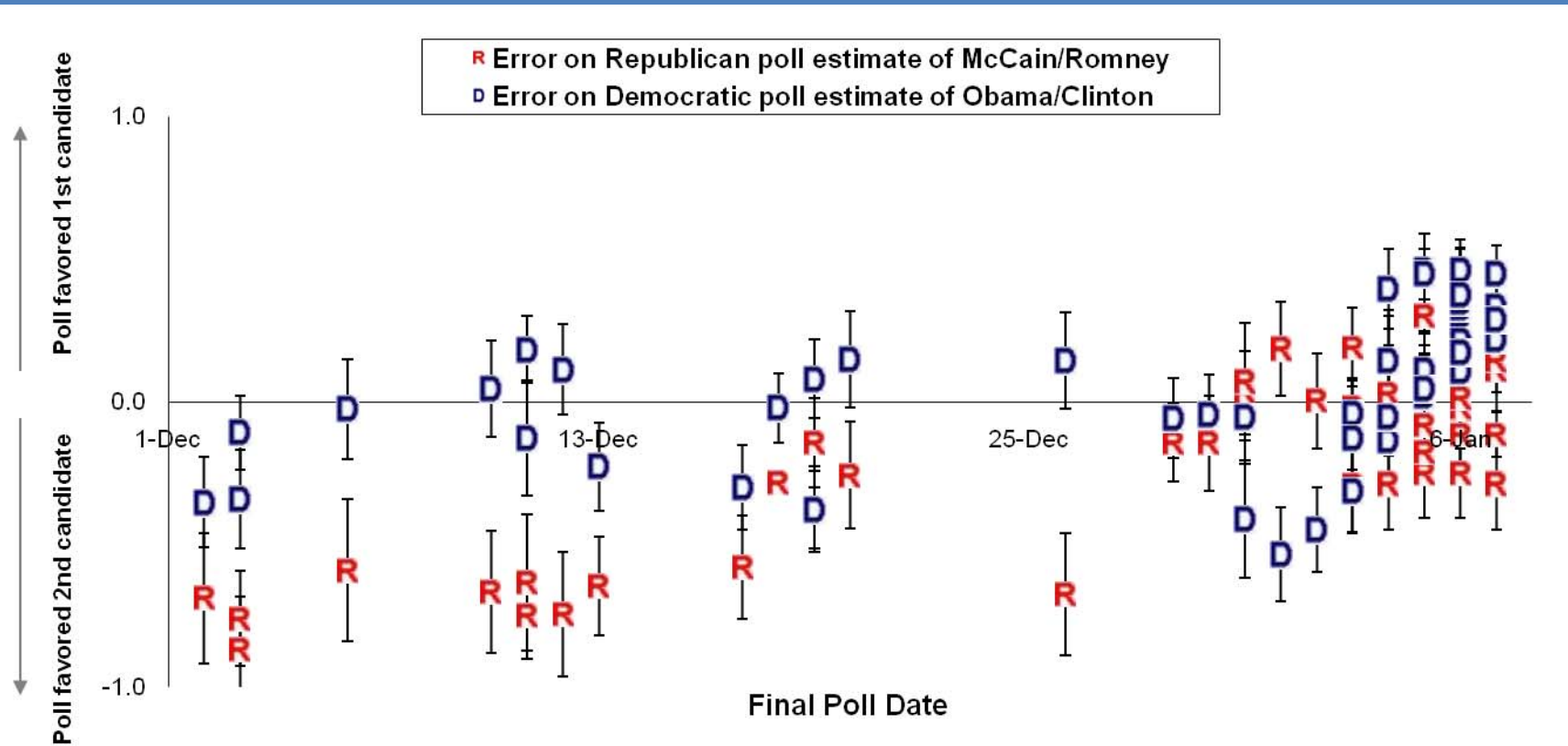
R Error on Republican poll estimate of McCain/Romney
D Error on Democratic poll estimate of Obama/Clinton

Poll favored 1st candidate
Poll favored 2nd candidate

1.0
0.0
-1.0

1-Dec   13-Dec   25-Dec   6-Jan

Final Poll Date

[1] Deviations from election results are calculated using *A*, which summarizes the degree to which a poll overstated or understated election day support for the 1st candidate relative to the 2nd candidate. Polls that predicted the exact election result (in terms of relative support for the top two candidates) have an *A* value of 0.0.

Main Conclusions from the Report

- Given the compressed caucus and primary calendar, polling before the New Hampshire primary may have ended too early to capture late shifts in the electorate there, measuring momentum as citizens responded to the Obama victory in the Iowa caucus but not to later events in New Hampshire.

- Patterns of non-response, derived from comparing the characteristics of the pre-election samples with the exit poll samples, suggest that some groups that supported Senator Hillary Clinton were underrepresented in the pre-election polls.

- Variations in likely voter models could explain some of the estimation problems in individual polls. While the "time of decision" data do not look very different in 2008 compared to recent presidential primaries, about one-fifth of the voters in the 2008 New Hampshire primary said they were voting for the first time. This influx of first-time voters may have had an adverse effect on likely voter models.

- Variations in weighting procedures could explain some of the estimation problems in individual polls. And for some polls, the weighting and likely voter modeling were comingled in a way that makes it impossible to distinguish their separate effects.

- Although no significant social desirability effects were found that systematically produced an overestimate of support for Senator Obama among white respondents or for Senator Clinton among male respondents, an interaction effect between the race of the interviewer and the race of the respondent did seem to produce higher support for Senator Obama in the case of a black interviewer. However, Obama was also preferred over Clinton by those who were interviewed by a white interviewer.

Intriguing Possibilities that Require Additional Data to Understand

- The wide variation in sample frames used to design and implement samples – ranging from random samples of listed telephone numbers, to lists of registered voters matched with telephone numbers, to lists of party members – may have had an effect. Greater information about sample frames and sample designs, including respondent selection techniques, would facilitate future evaluations of poll performance.

- Differences among polls in techniques employed to exclude data collected from some respondents could have affected estimates. What is the meaning of "oversamples" of women, whites, and older respondents?

- Some polls combined weighting to adjust for non-response among demographic groups with weighting that reflects likely voter models into a single set of weights for a study. This complicates the analysis of whether or how much sampling issues or likelihood of voting models are contributing to estimation error.

What Explains Lack of Mode Differences?

Table 6. Accuracy of Final 2008 Primary Pre-election Polls by Mode of Data Collection[A,B]

	Number of polls in final two weeks	Mean absolute value of A		Number of polls in final two weeks	Mean absolute value of A
Iowa Democratic Caucuses			**Iowa Republican Caucuses**		
CATI	12	0.25	CATI	11	0.23
IVR	1	0.41	IVR	1	0.27
New Hampshire Democratic Primary			**New Hampshire Republican Primary**		
CATI	13	0.26	CATI	12	0.15
IVR	1	0.28	IVR	1	0.11
South Carolina Democratic Primary			**South Carolina Republican Primary**		
CATI	5	0.43	CATI	5	0.16
IVR	3	0.25	IVR	3	0.13
California Democratic Primary			**California Republican Primary**		
CATI	8	0.20	CATI	7	0.16
IVR	3	0.13	IVR	2	0.17
Wisconsin Democratic Primary			**Wisconsin Republican Primary**		
CATI	3	0.21	CATI	3	0.19
IVR	2	0.17	IVR	1	0.08

[A] Only the final estimates from each poll are included in this analysis. No poll is included more than once, but the set of polls considered is larger than that listed in Table 5 because all polls during the final two weeks are included here.

[B] Small sample sizes, particularly with respect to the small number of IVR polls, severely limit attempts to isolate an effect from mode on accuracy.

Likely Voter Models Had Little Effect, Except for Gallup (in the wrong direction)

Table 13. Full Sample vs. Likely Voter Estimates

	n	Obama	Clinton	Other	Und.	Total	A
NH Democratic Primary		36%	39%	24%		100%	
Gallup: LV estimate	778	41%	28%	29%	2%	100%	0.45
Gallup: Full sample estimate	1,224	39%	34%	25%	3%	100%	0.22

	n	Obama	Clinton	Other	Und.	Total	A
CA Democratic Primary		43%	52%	5%		100%	
PPIC: LV estimate	644	28%	43%	18%	11%	100%	-0.25
PPIC: Full sample estimate	791	26%	45%	16%	13%	100%	-0.37

	n	McCain	Romney	Huckabee	Other	Und.	Total	A
CA Republican Primary		42%	35%	12%	11%		100%	
PPIC: LV estimate	392	29%	17%	10%	30%	14%	100%	0.33
PPIC: Full sample estimate	485	29%	15%	10%	30%	16%	100%	0.46

All sample sizes in this table are unweighted.

What Additional Information Do We Need in Order to Learn More?

Updated disclosure items and standards to capture current data collection methods

Promoting a greater willingness among pollsters to disclose information not required by current standards (What would be the appropriate mechanisms for facilitating this?)

Interest in collaborating on analysis of existing undisclosed information (effects of randomizing candidate names) and willingness to experiment in new data collections