

THE FIELD POLL

THE INDEPENDENT AND NON-PARTISAN SURVEY
OF PUBLIC OPINION ESTABLISHED IN 1947 AS
THE CALIFORNIA POLL BY MERVIN FIELD

Field Research Corporation
222 Sutter Street, Suite 700
San Francisco, CA 94108-4411
(415) 392-5763 FAX: (415) 434-2541
EMAIL: fieldpoll@field.com
www.field.com/fieldpollonline

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A Different Take on “Why Polls Differ”

By Mark DiCamillo and Mervin Field

The *Los Angeles Times* on September 12 in reporting on its latest statewide *Times Poll* in the recall election of Governor Gray Davis took the additional step of trying to explain to its readers why its poll results differed from those of a *Field Poll* reported earlier in the week. David Lauter bylined the story, “Why Polls Differ.”

The *Times Poll*, conducted September 6-10, reported that 50% of voters said they intended to vote Yes to recall the Governor, while 47% were taking a No position. By contrast, *The Field Poll* survey conducted September 3-7 found 55% intending to vote Yes and 40% on the No side.

There was basic agreement between the two polls with regard to their measures in the candidate race to replace Davis should he be recalled. Each poll showed Democrat Cruz Bustamante leading Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger by an identical 30% to 25% margin, although the two polls differed in respect to the size of the vote for Republican Tom McClintock, who placed third in both polls. The *Times Poll* pegged McClintock’s support at 18%, while *The Field Poll* had it at 13%.

In attempting to explain the reasons for the differences in the two polls in the recall election, Lauter stated that due to each poll’s margin of error (+/-3 points applicable to the *Times Poll* and +/-4.5 points for *The Field Poll*), it is possible the lowest range estimate of Yes side support for the recall from *The Field Poll* could be overlapping with the highest range estimate of Yes side support in the *Times Poll*, inferring that the findings of the two polls were not really so dissimilar. He also cites the fact that while there was some overlap in the interviewing dates of the two surveys, *The Field Poll* started earlier and the *Times Poll* ended later, and that this also could have been responsible for some of the variation.

When comparing the results of two polls, the difference in sample size and timing of interviewing can sometimes account for differences. However, in this case, it appears that other aspects of each poll need to be considered before invoking these standard explanations.

Racial/ethnic subgroup differences

The *Times Poll* reported that 71% of its sample were white non-Hispanics, and on the Davis recall they divided 54% Yes and 43% No, an eleven point plurality on the Yes side. Among Latinos who accounted for 11% of the *Times Poll* sample, the split was 53% Yes and 41% No, a twelve point plurality on the Yes side. Thus, its poll showed that when the preferences of white non-Hispanics and Latinos were combined, accounting for 82% of its likely voters, they divided approximately 54% Yes and 43 No, an eleven percentage point plurality on the Yes side.

When the state's two major racial/ethnic subgroups combined produce an eleven-point plurality on the Yes side, it would mean that the remaining 18% of the *Times Poll* sample had to have had dramatically different preferences for the overall total to be 50% Yes and 47% No.

It is a simple arithmetic exercise to calculate that the unreported 18% in the *Times Poll* had to be against the recall approximately two to one (66% No to 33% Yes) to justify the overall finding of the *Times Poll*.

While it is not unusual for a small voting segment in a poll to divide very differently from larger majority segments, such a result would have been a significant poll finding.

While the sample sizes of the individual components of this 18%, which presumably comprised black/African-Americans, Asians and voters of other racial and ethnic groups, were probably too small to produce reliable poll estimates, the voting preferences of the combined 18% could have and probably should have been reported, particularly since they apparently had such a dramatic impact on the overall poll results. The *Times* made no reference to this fact.

In the absence of any reporting by the *Times Poll* as to the relative sizes of their black/African-American and Asian subgroups and how they divided in their voting preferences on the recall, we offer these observations for consideration. The September *Field Poll* found that 6% of the likely voters in its sample were black/Africans-American voters and 7% were Asians/others. Last year, in a statewide exit poll conducted by the *Times*, it was found that 4% of all voters in that election were black/African-Americans and 6% were Asians.

Why did the size of the unreported racial/ethnic subgroups in latest *Times Poll* amount to 18%, when according to its own exit poll, blacks and Asian voters combined comprised just 10% of all voters in the last general election? Did the *Times Poll* sample include a proportionate number of black/African-Americans or a disproportionately large number, whose inclusion, due to their strong opposition to the recall, could have skewed their poll results? And, what about the preferences of Asian voters, who historically tend to be more divided in their voting preferences on partisan matters? If there were imbalances in these minority group cells, were they weighted to bring them into conformity with historical voting patterns? If not, why not?

Differences in ideological classifications

Instead of dwelling on these matters, Lauter focuses his attention on the fact that 38% of the voters in the *Times Poll* identified themselves as conservatives, compared to 32% in *The Field Poll*. He also points out that 34% of the *Times Poll* likely voter sample identified themselves as liberal, compared to 25% in *The Field Poll*. In respect to the proportion of voters classifying themselves as moderates (or middle-of-the-road) in politics, it was 26% in the *Times Poll* and 43% in *The Field Poll*.

He then infers the differences between the polls as being due to differences in the ideological make-up of each poll's likely voter sample. The problem with this argument is that the two polls go about measuring voters' political ideology in very different ways. For over twenty years, *The Field Poll* has employed a question sequence devised by the University of Michigan in its National Election Surveys. The approach asks voters the following set of questions to assess their political ideology:

1. "Generally speaking, in politics do you consider yourself as conservative, liberal, middle-of-the-road, or don't you think of yourself in these terms."
2. (IF CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERAL) "Do you consider yourself a strong or not very strong (conservative) (liberal)?"
3. (IF DON'T THINK IN THESE TERMS OR NO OPINION) "If you had to choose would you consider yourself as being conservative, liberal or middle-of-the-road?"

The results from these questions are then combined to place voters on a five-point political ideology scale: strongly conservative, moderately conservative, middle-of-road, moderately liberal and strongly liberal.

By contrast, it is our understanding that the *Times Poll* derives the political ideology of voters through a single question, asking voters the following question, "How would you describe your views on most matters having to do with politics? Do you generally think of yourself as very liberal or somewhat liberal or middle-of-the-road or somewhat conservative or very conservative?"

The results of these two very different lines of questions apparently produce very different characterizations of the political ideology of California voters. From our perspective, we are inclined to believe that *The Field Poll*'s procedure produces a closer approximation of the actual ideological leanings of Californians than the one employed by the *Times Poll*.

However, more germane to this issue is that differences between the *Times Poll* and *The Field Poll* in the recall election can not be explained by differences in each poll's estimates of the number of conservatives and liberals, since each poll arrives at these percentages very differently. And, if this were truly the explanation for differences in each poll's recall election results, they would also have been expected to produce diverging results in each poll's findings in the replacement election, and this was clearly not the case.