**2018 Exit Poll Methodology and Guidelines**

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Introduction

Exit poll data has been used for decades for a variety of reasons. Exit polls are perhaps best known in America for their role in helping to forecast and explain US elections every November. Exit poll data help news organizations to project the winners of an election before all of the votes have been counted. In a business where being the first to break the story is critical for success, this makes exit polling well worth its cost. Perhaps more importantly, exit polls are used to help explain election results. Because votes are anonymous, we may know how a certain precinct voted overall, but we do not know who in that precinct voted for each candidate. Because exit polling asks voters who they cast their ballot for as well as measures their demographics and attitudes, they can go a long way towards explaining why election results turned out the way they did. When the media and political scientists try to explain election results, this makes exit polling critical.

Most exit polling works by surveying individuals as they leave their polling places on Election Day. According to the procedures of the poll, individuals are randomly asked to complete anonymous questionnaires. These results are totaled and reported to a central location where they are analyzed. In states where a significant amount of the population votes before Election Day (such as in states with early or mail voting), pollsters may supplement traditional polling place surveys with phone surveys of individuals who voted before Election Day as well. Because a relatively small percentage of votes in Aiken County are cast absentee (15.0% in 2018), we elected to conduct the exit poll purely via polling place surveys.

Aiken County has been surveyed via exit polls for decades by the USCA Social Sciences and Business Research Lab by Drs. Botsch and Thornburg, meaning it is one of the most well-studied counties in the South. Many questions have remained the same on the poll from election to election, allowing us to gauge changes in the attitudes of Aiken County voters over time. The 2018 Exit Poll was the latest incarnation of this long running survey. It took place during the 2018 General Election, Tuesday November 6, 2018.

*Purpose and Overview*

The 2018 Exit Poll serves a dual purpose. As in past years, the exit poll provides a representative picture of voters in Aiken County, giving us an overview of their characteristics, such as party identification, ideology and other basic attributes. We also assessed their opinions on a number of issues. Many of these questions have been asked often in the past, allowing us to gauge how public opinion in Aiken County is changing over time in important ways. Because the exit poll also records the candidates each respondent votes for, it can help us infer what the voters for each candidate looked like and believed. In short, it is very useful information.

This year’s exit poll added an additional element. In addition to providing a representative picture of Aiken County, the poll surveyed a number of additional precincts in some areas of the county in order to provide a representative picture of two State House district races. Most exit polls are primarily focused on “big races” such as those for president or statewide office. Thus, little attention has been paid to vote for local races. The 2018 Exit Poll focused on State House District 81 which covers the center of the county, including the City of Aiken as well as State House District 84 which covers the “Valley” portion of Aiken. This work provides a representative picture of each district.

The poll overall sampled from twelve polling places across the county encompassing sixteen precincts. Eight of the polling places (eleven of the precincts) were used to construct a representative sample of the county. Five polling places (eight of the precincts) were used to construct a representative sample of State House District 81 and four of the polling places (five of the precincts) were used to construct a representative sample of State House District 84. Some polling places and precincts were part of more than one of these samples (Table 1).

Procedures

The exit poll conducted in Aiken County is not a true random sample. If this were the case, voters from all precincts in Aiken County would need to have some probability of being polled. Since there are currently 84 precincts in Aiken County, this would be difficult. Given that the sample size for the countywide exit poll is approximately 710, this would mean interviewers would need to go to every precinct and conduct on average fewer than ten interviews a precinct. Instead, following standard practice in exit poll sampling, the 2018 Exit Poll uses a combination of cluster sampling and systematic sampling. This has been the standard employed in previous elections by the SSBRL under Dr. Botsch and Dr. Thornburg and is fairly standard for exit polls across the country and world.

Rather than sample completely randomly, cluster sampling in exit polling selects a number of polling places that together are considered to be “representative” of the greater area being polled in ways that matter to the researcher (more on that below). Here, the “clusters” are composed of precincts in Aiken County that together provide a representative picture of the county and within each sampled precinct, interviewers will conduct systematic sampling of men and women.

*Selecting Clusters*

Precincts Sampled

Table 1: Precincts and Polling Places Sampled in Aiken County

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Polling Place/Precincts | County Sample | District 81 Sample | District 84 Sample |
| 3 | X |  |  |
| 7 |  |  | X |
| 15 |  |  | X |
| 16 |  | X |  |
| 17 | X |  | X |
| 29 | X |  |  |
| 35 | X | X |  |
| 67 | X |  |  |
| 20 & 77 |  | X |  |
| 52 & 83 | X | X |  |
| 6 & 47 | X | X |  |
| 12 & 49 | X |  | X |

Countywide Precincts

Precincts are selected in Aiken County according to three criteria: demographic representativeness, partisan representativeness and geographic representativeness. Politically and socially, Aiken County can be divided up into four distinct areas: the City of Aiken, the City of North Augusta, the “Valley” region, and outlying rural areas. Within the county, these areas are distinct in their social and demographic character and thus it is necessary to represent each among the precincts polled. In the 2016 Exit Poll, 8 precinct locations were polled with two locations representing each area. I also included one precinct (Precinct 11) that is majority African-American.

In addition to geographic coverage, it is necessary for precincts to be representative politically as well as demographically of the greater county. In the past, this was accomplished by creating a weighted average of the vote breakdown for highest office in the previous election among the selected precincts and comparing it to the countywide vote. This was complicated in 2016 due to the fact that Aiken County substantially altered the organization of its precincts earlier that year. Thus, data on general election vote from previous elections did not exist broken down by the new precinct boundaries. I instead used turnout in the 2016 presidential primary which proved a valid proxy for partisanship: the weighted presidential vote breakdown of the polled precincts in 2016 was within two percentage points of the county-wide vote.

Unfortunately, because no previous midterms have been conducted under this new precinct organization, I was forced to use 2016 presidential vote as a proxy for precinct partisanship in midterm elections. With the official vote totals now available, the representativeness of the precincts sample to the actual vote totals can be evaluated. For the eight polling places used in the countywide sample, here is the breakdown of the sample precincts compared to the overall vote in the county for governor. I also include the actual, *unweighted* exit poll results from the sampled precincts.

Table 2: Countywide Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Vote for Governor

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official County Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Henry McMaster | 61.7% | 60.5% | 57.6% |
| James Smith | 38.2% | 39.4% | 42.4% |

In addition, I also evaluated balance on demographic representativeness among both my selected precincts as well as my exit poll results. I use a copy of the South Carolina voter file that records turnout in the 2018 general election to evaluate the race and gender of voters in the county and compare them to the precincts I selected and the exit poll results.

Table 3: County Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Gender

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official County Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Female | 54.7% | 55.9% | 51.3% |
| Male | 45.3% | 44.0% | 45.5% |

Table 4: County Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Ethnicity

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official County Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| White | 77.0% | 78.1% | 74.9% |
| Black | 20.9% | 19.7% | 21.8% |
| Other | 2.1% | 2.2% | 3.4% |

State House District 81 Precincts

As mentioned, the exit poll also conducted a representative sample of State House District 81. This district stretches from the northern to southern border of the county and is centered squarely on the City of Aiken. In similar fashion, to the county, the goal in selecting precincts in District 81 is to represent it, geographically, demographically and in terms of partisanship.

Geographically, District 81 takes in several distinct areas. Chief among them is the City of Aiken, a large urban, racially diverse area. In addition, District 81 includes the developments west-southwest of Aiken (the Gem Lakes region) as well as rural areas south of Aiken and east of Graniteville. Precinct selection attempts to take in these distinct regions.

As with the countywide precinct selection, we are concerned that the selected precincts in District 81 are representative in terms of partisanship. Given that we are interested in the State House race, the best test would be to compare vote for State House in the selected precincts versus the District at large. However, the only general election conducted using these precinct boundaries was the 2016 election and in that race Republican Bart Blackwell was unopposed in the general election for the SH 81 seat. Therefore, I once again used 2016 presidential vote to select politically representative precincts for the 81st district. In similar fashion, with final results and turnout data now available we can see how both the selected precincts and exit poll results of the actual contest in terms of politics and demographics:

Table 5: District 81 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Vote for State House Representative

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 81 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Bart Blackwell | 63.0% | 60.2% | 54.9% |
| Elise Fox | 37.0% | 39.7% | 45.1% |

A combination of the selected sampled understating Blackwell’s actual total in the district as well as the exit poll results understating the precinct results leads the exit poll to significantly understate Blackwell’s win in the district. It is notable that the error in the exit poll results (the difference between columns 2 and 3) is near the margin of error for the sample which is 5% since fewer than 400 voters make up the District 81 sample. These results were corrected with weights as detailed in Codebook and Data Usage Guide.

Table 6: District 81 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Gender

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 81 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Female | 54.0% | 55.1% | 50.2% |
| Male | 46.0% | 44.9% | 49.8% |

Table 7: District 81 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Ethnicity

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 81 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| White | 87.3% | 83.5% | 81.8% |
| Black | 10.1% | 14.2% | 14.3% |
| Other | 2.5% | 2.5% | 4.0% |

State House District 84 Precincts

The exit poll conducted a representative sample of State House District 84. District takes in the western part of Aiken County, with the exception of North Augusta and its main population serves to be the “Valley” region of the county, although the district also includes other outlying areas of the county including Beech Island and Jackson. The procedure described above was also utilized in selecting precincts for District 84.

In the case of District 84, the accuracy of selecting precincts was aided by the fact that a competitive State House race was run the previous year in the special election to fill the District 84 seat after the resignation of the previous incumbent. These results were used to select precincts for District 84.

Table 8: District 84 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Vote for State House Representative

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 84 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Ronnie Young | 64.8% | 70.7% | 68.1% |
| Jennifer Cook Lariscey | 35.1% | 29.3% | 31.9% |

Table 9: District 84 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Gender

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 81 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| Female | 54.0% | 54.2% | 50.5% |
| Male | 46.0% | 45.7% | 49.5% |

Table 10: District 84 Precinct Representativeness and Unweighted Exit Poll Vote – Ethnicity

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Official District 81 Results | Weighted Results of Sample Precincts | Unweighted Exit Poll Results |
| White | 72.8% | 77.6% | 76.0% |
| Black | 25.4% | 21.0% | 23.4% |
| Other | 1.8% | 1.4% | 0.6% |

*Sampling at Polling Places*

We thus have selected a group of polling places that together form a representative picture of Aiken County and District 81 via cluster sampling. We now need to draw a sample from these polling places that is *representative* of the voters who cast their ballots at these locations. The standard method to achieve a representative sample at polling places when exit polling is systematic sampling. In systematic sampling in exit polling, individuals exiting a polling place after voting are stopped according to some set interval. Assuming that this interval is not correlated to differences among voters as they exit polling places, this form of systematic sampling will produce a representative sample of individuals voting at a precinct.

In the 2018 Exit Poll, an equal number of student interviewers at each polling place will be assigned to survey men and women, as the goal is an equal number of surveys per gender. At the beginning of the shift, the student interviewer assigned to interview men (women) will approach the first man (woman) they see exiting a polling place and ask them to participate in the survey. If this individual agrees, they will be given a clipboard with the questionnaire and a pencil. If the approached individual refuses, the interviewer will note the refusal (more on that below) and then approach the next man (woman) leaving the polling place. When the interviewer gets an individual to agree to fill out the questionnaire, the interviewer will give the subject room. After the subject completes the questionnaire, they will fold it up and put it in a box, giving the clipboard and pencil back to the interviewer.

The interviewer will then place another questionnaire on the clipboard and immediately approach the next man (woman) leaving the polling place, repeating the process. The “interval” in the sample in this case is the time it takes an individual to fill out their questionnaire.

Note, that the representativeness of the sample at the polling places depends on strict adherence to this metric. If interviewers violate this, for example by approaching subjects that look friendlier or have particular demographic characteristics that the interviewer perceives as easier to get along with, they will bias the sample. The sample will only be representative if every member leaving a polling place during the interviewing has an equal probability of being interviewed. Approaching voters because they appear friendlier or more interested in conducting the exit poll will cause more of these “friendly” and “interested” people to appear in the sample than actually make up the voting population at the precincts. Because these characteristics may correlate with political or demographic attitudes, this will give us an inaccurate picture of Aiken County voters.

*Recording Nonresponse*

Voters approached to fill out a questionnaire are not required to complete the survey. The student interviewers will use techniques that have been honed over time to get the maximum number of individuals participating. Nevertheless, some individuals that the interviewers approach will still refuse to complete the questionnaire. That is fine. If the interviewer follows the procedure, including using fallback statements and the individual still refuses to conduct the survey, the interviewer will thank the individual for their time and approach the next available voter of their assigned gender leaving the polling place.

However, for statistical and methodological purposes, it is important that the interviewer records the number of individuals that refuse to fill out questionnaires. This is done by simply marking a tally on the back of the questionnaire envelope when an individual refuses to complete the questionnaire. While some exit polls record the race and gender of those refusing, this is not necessary for the 2018 USCA Exit Poll. Recording the number of refusals allows us to calculate the response rate—the percentage of individuals approached who actually filled out the questionnaire. Response rate, in turn, allows us to gauge whether the exit poll is likely to be representative of the group we sampled from. Low response rates raise questions about the degree to which our sample is representative.

*Interview Times*

The 2018 Exit Poll will proceed in two “waves” of data collection over the course of Election Day. The first wave will begin at 7:30 AM (interviewers will arrive at the polling places and set up at 7:00 AM). This wave will proceed until half of the quota of questionnaires has been filled. Interviewers will then get a break. They will return at 11:30 AM for the “second wave” and distribute the remaining questionnaires. Once they have reached their quota (used all questionnaires) they may leave.

This exit poll is not conducted in the evening, in contrast to most other exit polls. Research by Dr. Botsch has found that responses received in the evening do not significantly differ from responses received during the day. Thus, the two wave system during the day is representative of the precincts.