

MODEL NUMBER 9
OF A
“PUBLIC AWARENESS ANALYZED EXAMPLE”

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WHERE: This is found at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/weekinreview/12zernike.html>

WHAT: This is an article discussing possible sources of error in poll results about the 2008 presidential election, particularly due to race. Some parts are:

Since 1982, people have talked about the Bradley effect, where even last-minute polls predict a wide margin of victory, yet the black candidate goes on to lose, or win in a squeaker. (In the case that lent the phenomenon its name, Tom Bradley, the mayor of Los Angeles, lost his race for governor, the assumption being that voters lied to pollsters about their support for an African-American.)

But pollsters and political scientists say concern about a Bradley effect – some call it a Wilder effect or a Dinkins effect, and plenty call it a theory in search of data – is misplaced. It obscures what they argue is the more important point: there are plenty of ways that race complicates polling. Considered alone or in combination, these factors could produce an unforeseen Obama landslide with surprise victories in the South, a stunningly large Obama loss, or a recount-thin margin. In a year that has already turned expectations upside down, it is hard to completely reassure the fretters.

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Were people so afraid to appear bigoted that they lied to pollsters, thinking it more socially acceptable to support a black candidate? Pollsters and political scientists have long questioned that assumption because they do not believe people have an incentive to deceive unless they are explicitly asked, “Do you support the white guy or the black guy?”

“We have no evidence that people lie to us,” said Joe Lenski, executive vice president of Edison Media Research, which conducts the exit polls the television networks use. He and others say that discrepancy in the polls has more to do with which people decline to participate, or say they are undecided.

ANALYSIS: There are few statistical results given in this article, or technical terms used (or avoided but implied). The central theme of the article is what we call possible sources of **non-sampling error** – that is, ways the predicted results could be wrong, other than mere **sampling variability**.

CRITICISM: Most of the discussion in this article amounts to nothing other than recounting anecdotes about race as a possible source of such error. One attempt to be more systematic is where it says

In a new study, Daniel J. Hopkins, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, considered 133 elections between 1989 and 2006 and found that blacks running for office before 1996 suffered a median Bradley effect of 3 percentage points. Blacks running after 1996, however, performed about 3 percentage points better than their polls predicted. Mr. Hopkins argues that the changes in the welfare laws in 1996 and the decline of violent crime took off the table issues that had aggravated racial animosity.

and

In this years Democratic primaries, University of Washington researchers found a Bradley effect in three states, but a reverse Bradley effect in 12 (in the other 17, polls were within a seven-point margin of error).

The anecdotal evidence seems mixed, and attempts to study it carefully are not yielding a consistent answer. Perhaps the only reasonable conclusion is that we should be cautious about accepting the poll results too blindly, and we should be confident that the details of the polling methodology will most likely have a much larger impact on the results found than will the mathematical details of the statistical analysis.