

1996

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### Repository Citation

Simon, James L.; Smith, T. U.; and Merrill, Bruce D., "Telling the truth: Respondent accuracy in mass media polling" (1996). *English Faculty Publications*. 51.  
<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/51>

### Published Citation

Simon, James; Smith, T. U. & Merrill, Bruce D. (1996). "Telling the truth: Respondent accuracy in mass media polling." *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 12, 3-12.

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# Telling the truth: Respondent accuracy in mass media polling

James Simon, Tracy Ulrich-Smith and Bruce D. Merrill

Public opinion polls fulfill several functions for the mass media. They serve as the first measure of citizen opinion on an emerging issue;<sup>1</sup> allow reporters to explore the context in which events take place;<sup>2</sup> and enable news organizations to make news as well as report it.<sup>3</sup> Journalists and social scientists use polls in different manners, with the former emphasizing their immediate news value and the latter focusing on their value in explaining a general social process.<sup>4</sup> Media coverage of polls has been criticized for serving as a form of "checkbook journalism"<sup>5</sup> for encouraging politicians and government policy makers to make decisions based on short-term, parochial interests;<sup>6</sup> and for failing to fully inform readers about a poll's methodology<sup>7</sup> or the significance of the findings.<sup>8</sup>

Journalists and social scientists share a desire to ensure that poll data accurately reflect the views of the public. Attempts to ensure accuracy can be affected by the issue of whether the respondents are accurate and are telling the truth about the issues on which they comment. Survey researchers "rarely go beyond self-report"<sup>9</sup> in ascertaining whether respondents are telling the truth during an interview. More than 50 years ago, Herbert Hyman summarized the concern of survey researchers in the title of his paper, "Do They Tell the Truth."<sup>10</sup> That concern has not changed and has been underscored by the transformation of survey research from a tool for academic researchers to an instrument that can help shape political campaigns<sup>11</sup> and public policy.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the reliance on self-reporting, relatively little is known about the accuracy of the self-reporting method of data collection.<sup>13</sup> More emphasis has been given to the twin issue of the reliability of self-reports than to their validity.<sup>14</sup> Validation studies have been done on such issues as drug use, bankruptcies and arrests for drunken driving,<sup>15</sup> as well as voting.<sup>16</sup> There is evidence that socially desirable activities like voter registration, voting and charitable contributions tend to be over-reported, while undesirable experiences like bankruptcies tend to be under-reported.<sup>17</sup> In voting validation projects, the process of

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double checking turnout levels is difficult, expensive and time-consuming and can generate information on only a limited number of variables in a survey (e.g., voting turnout) that are verifiable.<sup>18</sup> The National Election Study, which validated self-reported turnout in past elections, chose not to do so in 1992. In media-sponsored polls, the need to make deadlines makes record validation checks on poll data even less likely.<sup>19</sup>

The tendency of respondents to inflate their self-reports on voting has been a chronic problem in public opinion polling. Wolfinger and Rosenstone wrote that since 1948, "reported turnout in national post-election surveys has never been less than 5 percent higher than the best estimate of the true turnout figure, and the gap between reported and actual turnout has sometimes approached 20 percent."<sup>20</sup> Four efforts by the National Election Study to validate turnout records found between 20 percent and 30 percent of respondents over-reported voting.<sup>21</sup> Other studies suggested that in terms of self-reported voting behavior, from 12 percent to 15 percent of respondents provided inaccurate responses after their answers were compared to official voting records.<sup>22</sup>

There is less agreement regarding which respondent characteristics and attitudes might be significant predictors of misreporting of voting. Some studies have found respondents who were inaccurate in describing their voting behavior matched the profile of non-voters in general: young, lower income, non-white citizens with lower political interest.<sup>23</sup> Other researchers suggest that inaccurate reporters of votes were not different from accurate reporters in terms of characteristics and attitudes.<sup>24</sup> For example, Tittle and Hill concluded that "in every instance, those incorrectly claiming that they had voted resembled more closely the actual voters than nonvoters."<sup>25</sup> A more recent study found education had an independent effect on voter misreporting: the better educated felt more pressure to misreport their vote because of social desirability.<sup>26</sup> Little work has been done on two other potential explanations for the variance in accuracy of self-reports: the respondents' level of involvement with the news media, and their attitudes toward the accuracy of polling in general. Respondents who attend to the news media on a regular basis, and those who generally believe polls to be accurate, would be expected to be more likely to be accurate in their responses than their counterparts due to a desire to avoid distorting the news reports and the polls they find useful and reliable.

This study attempts to clarify the conflicting evidence on whether inaccurate respondents are significantly different from accurate respondents. It offers an initial exploration of whether media exposure and attitudes toward polling significantly affect the accuracy of responses. The study, based on self-reported turnout levels among Arizona voters in the 1992 presidential election, also addresses a broader question: given the high cost of validation checks to ensure accuracy of poll results, does the level of misreporting justify the effort required to validate poll results?

## **Method**

The study was based on a two-stage research project. The first stage involved conducting a statewide telephone survey of 639 registered voters in Arizona between Nov. 4-11, the week after the 1992 presidential election. The survey was conducted as part of an ongoing polling program in the Media

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Research Program of the Department of Journalism and Telecommunication at Arizona State University. It was conducted in conjunction with public television station KAET-TV, whose volunteers were trained to make the telephone calls under the direct supervision of the Media Research Program.

Respondents were asked to address a variety of issues, including whether they had voted in the preceding week's election. The respondents represented a systematic random sample of voters generated from a list of all registered voters in the state. A comparison of the sample statistics to known population parameters indicated the sample was representative of the electorate. The overall confidence interval for the sample, based on a 95 percent confidence level and dichotomous answers estimated at .50, is plus or minus 3.9 percent on responses from the entire sample and higher for responses from subgroups.

The second stage of the study was based on a validation check to determine whether respondents had voted. The authors validated self-reported information on voting by examining voting records at each of the state's county voter registration offices. Of the 639 original respondents, 592 (92 percent) were successfully validated; the remainder were removed from the study. The major cause of the 47 voters not being validated was differences between the name of the person, as offered during the initial telephone survey, and the formal registration name on the records; when the names did not precisely match, the respondents were dropped from the survey.

In the first round of analysis, the accurate and inaccurate respondents were analyzed based on their demographic characteristics, media use patterns, political characteristics and attitudes toward polling in general. While logistic regression would be a preferred method to estimate the contribution of each independent variable to the variance in a dichotomous dependent variable, the low percentage of inaccurate responses (8 percent) made such an approach prohibitive. Instead, Cramer's V, a Chi-Square based measure, was used to measure the level of association. It can attain the value of 1 for tables of any dimension, thereby facilitating comparisons across studies.

In a second round of analysis, those variables found to be significantly related to the dependent variable were isolated. Education was introduced as a control variable, due to its nature as one of the better predictors of voting behavior.<sup>27</sup>

The high turnout in the 1992 presidential contest, which reduced the number of non-voters who might overstate their vote, served as a limiting factor for this study. Turnout in Arizona totaled 75.7 percent of registered voters, up from 68.1 percent in 1988.<sup>28</sup> A lower turnout level would have resulted in more non-voters who might have been tempted to tell interviewers they had voted so as to be associated with a socially desirable activity. Similarly, the use of registered voters as the subjects for the study also may have limited the variance in accuracy of responses; if non-registered voters had been included, the social desirability associated with voting may have prompted a greater percentage of non-registered voters to say they cast a ballot. Finally, the study also may have been affected by the accuracy of the master list of voters from which the sample was drawn. The list was generated in early October and did not include all final registrants.

## Results

The results of the self-reported voting and the validated voting levels are presented in Table 1. The validation check showed that 7.6 percent of registered voters in Arizona misrepresented their voting activity after the 1992 presidential election, while 92.4 percent accurately reported whether they had cast a ballot. Of the 41 inaccurate respondents, 39 claimed to have voted while the validation check showed they had not done so. Interestingly, two respondents said they had

**TABLE 1**  
**Results of Validation Check of Voting Records**

	% of all respondents	n
<u>Accurate Respondents</u>		
Reported did vote, Validated did vote	90.0%	487
Reported did not vote, Validated did not vote	2.4%	13
<u>Inaccurate Respondents</u>		
Reported did vote, Validated did not vote	7.2%	39
Reported did not vote, Validated did vote	0.4%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	100%	n=541

not voted while the validation check indicated they had done so.

The analysis then turned to independent variables that may help explain the variance in the accuracy of the self-reports. The initial analysis of five demographic variables shown in Table 2 found two — race and age — were significantly related to the accuracy of responses (although at the weak levels of  $V=.12$ ,  $p < .01$  for race and  $V=.11$ ,  $p < .05$  for age). Non-white respondents and younger respondents appeared less likely to be accurate in reporting whether they voted.

The initial analysis then looked at the media use patterns of respondents to see if higher media exposure levels were associated with higher levels of accuracy. The survey asked respondents how many days per week they "watch the evening news on TV" and read a newspaper; it also asked how much attention they paid to each task. None of the relationships were statistically significant.

TABLE 2

## Characteristics of Accurate vs. Non-Accurate Respondents

	Accurate	Inaccurate	Total	n	V*
<b>1. Demographic</b>					
<u>Characteristic</u>					
White	94%	6%	100%	490	.12##
Non-white	84%	16%	100%	70	
<b>Age</b>					
18-45	90%	10%	100%	460	.11#
45 +	95%	5%	100%	282	
<b>Education</b>					
≤ High school	90%	10%	100%	124	.05
Some college	94%	6%	100%	203	
College graduate	93%	7%	100%	139	
Post-graduate	91%	9%	100%	68	
<b>Sex</b>					
Male	91%	9%	100%	214	.04
Female	93%	7%	100%	325	
<b>Religion</b>					
Protestant	96%	4%	100%	183	.11
Catholic	90%	10%	100%	126	
Mormon	97%	3%	100%	37	
Other	90%	10%	100%	89	
No relig pref.	90%	10%	100%	90	
<b>2. Media use characteristics</b>					
<u>Days/week watch evening news on TV</u>					
0 days	92%	8%	100%	25	.09
1	93%	7%	100%	27	
2	85%	15%	100%	33	
3	93%	7%	100%	58	
4	90%	10%	100%	52	
5	91%	9%	100%	86	
6	94%	6%	100%	49	
7	94%	6%	100%	206	
<b>Attention paid to TV</b>					
<u>cvg. of pres. campaign</u>					
A great deal	92%	8%	100%	201	.05
Quite a bit	92%	8%	100%	147	
Some	94%	6%	100%	116	

	Accurate	Inaccurate	Total	n	V*
Very little	91%	9%	100%	.43	
None	90%	10%	100%	.20	
<b>Days/week read newspaper</b>					
0 days	95%	5%	100%	42	.12
1	88%	12%	100%	41	
2	90%	10%	100%	38	
3	86%	14%	100%	42	
4	100%	0%	100%	23	
5	91%	9%	100%	44	
6	90%	10%	100%	29	
7	94%	6%	100%	271	
<b>Attention paid to newsp. cvg. of pres. campaign</b>					
A great deal	97%	3%	100%	141	.11
Quite a bit	90%	10%	100%	130	
Some	90%	10%	100%	134	
Very little	92%	8%	100%	67	
None	93%	7%	100%	43	
<b><u>3. Political characteristics</u></b>					
Republican	96%	4%	100%	254	.12#
Democrat	90%	10%	100%	231	
Other	85%	15%	100%	48	
<b>Registered to vote this year</b>					
Yes	86%	14%	100%	154	.15##
No	95%	5%	100%	376	
<b>Presidential choice</b>					
Bush	96%	4%	100%	199	.12#
Clinton	89%	11%	100%	194	
Perot	93%	7%	100%	99	
<b>Voting frequency in past 10 years</b>					
All elections	95%	5%	100%	302	.12
Half of election	90%	10%	100%	158	
Less than half	89%	11%	100%	45	
First time voted	84%	16%	100%	19	
<b>Whether it was person's first time voting</b>					
Yes	90%	10%	100%	29	.03
No	93%	7%	100%	487	

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	Accurate	Accurate	Total	n	V*	
<b>How closely respondent follows politics</b>						
Extremely closely	94%	6%	100%	116	.13	
Very closely	95%	6%	100%	206		
Somewhat closely	90%	10%	100%	174		
Not very close	93%	7%	100%	28		
Not closely at all	78%	22%	100%	11		
<b>Conservative</b>						
	94%	6%	100%	201	.09	
<b>Moderate</b>						
	92%	8%	100%	254		
<b>Liberal</b>						
	87%	13%	100%	68		
<b>4. Attitudes toward public opinion polling</b>						
<b>Influence of polls</b>						
no influence	93%	7%	100%	94	.06	
some influence	94%	6%	100%	181		
a lot of influence	91%	9%	100%	165		
a great deal of infl.	96%	4%	100%	68		
<b>Are people truthful in talking to pollsters</b>						
never	83%	7%	100%	12	.10	
seldom	90%	10%	100%	92		
most time	95%	5%	100%	313		
all time	89%	11%	100%	56		
<b>How accurate are polls in the media</b>						
extremely accurate	93%	7%	100%	14	.05	
very accurate	96%	4%	100%	66		
generally accurate	92%	8%	100%	271		
not very accurate	93%	7%	100%	122		
not accurate at all	93%	7%	100%	15		
<b>How much do you follow media polls</b>						
frequently	96%	4%	100%	74	.05	
often	92%	8%	100%	113		
seldom	92%	8%	100%	214		
never	93%	7%	100%	118		

\*Measure of association expressed by Cramer's V

# p < .05

## p < .01

Seven political characteristics were examined, ranging from respondents' voting history to their ideology and candidate choice. Three of the variables were found to be significantly related in the initial analysis to voting accuracy, again at



relatively weak levels: party affiliation ( $V=.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ), whether the person registered to vote this year ( $V=.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and choice of presidential candidate ( $V=.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Political independents, newly registered voters and those supporting Clinton appeared to be less likely to be accurate in reporting whether they voted.

Finally, four additional questions were examined to see if a person's overall views toward public opinion polling would be related to the accuracy of their self-reported vote. Respondents were asked to estimate whether most people lied to pollsters, if polls were inherently inaccurate, if polls have little influence and if they follow polls much. None of the indicators were significantly correlated with whether the respondent accurately reported their vote.

In summary, the initial data analysis suggested that five of the characteristics and attitudes most closely associated in the literature with high turnout — non-minority group members, older voters, registered Republicans, veteran voters and those supporting a Republican candidate — also were associated initially with accurate reporting of their activities on Election Day.

These five variables were then reexamined while controlling for the intervening impact of education, as shown in Table 3. This secondary analysis showed none of the relationships remained significant across the four education levels examined. Ironically, education by itself was not found to be significantly related to accuracy of responses on turnout in the initial analysis. But as an intervening variable, education explained much of the variance in accuracy, especially due to

**TABLE 3**  
**Strength of Association, Respondent Characteristics Vs. Turnout Accuracy, Controlling for Education**

	$\leq$ High School		Some College		College Grad		Post Graduate	
	V*	p	V	p	V	p	V	p
Race	.37	<.001	.03	>.05	.09	>.05	.16	<.001
Age	.22	<.05	.08	>.05	.07	>.05	.11	>.05
Party	.28	<.01	.09	>.05	.11	>.05	.10	>.05
Register this year	.09	>.05	.19	<.01	.16	>.05	.19	>.05
Presidential preference	.15	>.05	.10	>.05	.12	>.05	.10	>.05

\*Measure of association expressed by Cramer's V.

the tendency of those respondents with a high school education or less to vote at much lower levels than those with more schooling. Therefore, the initial significant relationships between characteristics and attitudes and a voter's accuracy proved to be spurious in the secondary analysis.

## Discussion

This study suggests that several potential problems related to over-reporting of turnout may be less significant than expected. Differences between accurate and inaccurate respondents in terms of demographic characteristics, media use patterns and political characteristics were found to be non-significant or spurious. Even a respondent's feeling on whether people generally lie to pollsters did not have a significant relationship to whether they then lied to the pollsters, in the context of this study. Some earlier studies of vote over-reporting did find several variables were significant predictors of overstated turnout, including age<sup>29</sup>, race<sup>30</sup>, party affiliation and participation in earlier elections.<sup>31</sup> However, the results here are similar to other studies<sup>32</sup> that found no significant differences between accurate and non-accurate respondents in terms of self-reported voting behavior. The similarity between the two groups persisted even after this study examined two additional sets of independent variables: respondents' media exposure levels and attitudes toward polling.

The present results echoed the conclusion of Sigelman, who suggested that "it seems safe to say that researchers who fit models of voting using self-reported rather than validated data would not be led very far astray in terms of what they conclude about the overall extent to which voting is related to demographic and political characteristics."<sup>33</sup> While using validated results would always be the preferred procedure in data analysis, the results of this study suggest that the high cost of the process and the quality of the validation itself should be weighed by the researcher. For this small Arizona study, it took about 100 hours and up to \$1,000 to contact all county boards of elections and validate the records of 639 registered voters. This effort yielded only 41 individuals who inaccurately reported their vote, and their characteristics and attitudes were not significantly different than those respondents who did accurately report their vote. The high cost of the validation process, coupled with the need for news organizations to report poll results quickly, makes validation checks on poll results less attractive.<sup>34</sup> In this study, the high cost of validation and the lack of significant differences between accurate and non-accurate respondents — even on such issues as their media use or views toward polling — offers additional evidence that the process may not be worth the effort.

Finally, the official turnout records themselves may not always be accurate, further limiting the value of the checking process. Presser and Traugott warn "the standard against which responses are validated may itself contain errors. ... At least some of the record entries are probably in error, and mistakes may have been made in matching survey cases to record cases."<sup>35</sup> So, while the journalist and the academic continue to share a desire to maximize accuracy of polls, this study suggests one traditional method — validating whether a respondent actually voted in an election — may not yield enough significant information as to justify the effort. The lack of significant differences between respondents who told the truth and those who did not reduces any distortion caused by inclusion of both

types of respondents in a survey. The time and effort consumed by such validation checks might be better spent on the many other issues associated with maximizing the reliability and validity of polling.

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