

See You at the Polls:  
Exit Polling as a Tool for Teaching Research Methods and Promoting Civic Engagement

Jocelyn Evans  
Olivia Lagergren  
*University of West Florida*

11000 University Parkway,  
Bldg. 50, Rm. 125  
Pensacola, FL 32514  
850-474-2337  
[jevans@uwf.edu](mailto:jevans@uwf.edu)

We examine an exit poll as a tool for introducing the basics of survey research and encouraging civic engagement. In terms of research methods, this activity is useful in teaching students about the process of conducting research and the principles of survey methodology. Students are engaged in survey design, survey administration, data entry, and data analysis. Through the process, students develop an appreciation for the obstacles faced by pollsters, techniques for attaining a random sample, the role of the interviewer, the importance of survey design, and analysis of quantitative data. In terms of civic engagement, this exercise introduces students to the political demography of the area and immerses them in the electoral process on Election Day. To qualitatively the impact of this activity on student learning and feelings of political efficacy, we administered two open-ended questionnaires to students participating in our exit poll project. These student evaluations suggest that the exit poll is an effective pedagogical tool for engaging students in active learning even in the dense subject of research methods.

Prepared for presentation at the annual Teaching and Learning Conference of the American Political Science Association, February 9-11, Charlotte, NC.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, we examine the use of a student-administered exit poll to teach research methods and to promote civic engagement. This project is incorporated into a course on campaign and elections offered at the University of West Florida every two years corresponding with the general election cycle. While this exercise was utilized both in 2004 and 2006, for this analysis we focus mainly on the student evaluations offered during the 2006 course. Two open-ended questionnaires administered to students upon completion of the project provide qualitative evidence of the effectiveness of this instructional tool for teaching research methods. This evidence leads us to conclude that exit polls are a useful means of exposing students firsthand to the key concepts of survey research, including: sampling, questionnaire design, question wording, question sequencing, the role of the interviewer, and bias. Further, this evidence suggests that exit polls are a useful means of inculcating student civic engagement. In the following pages, we examine the literature on surveys as pedagogical tools, describe the experience of our students at UWF, and relay the students' evaluations of this educational experience.

## **Literature Review**

Over thirty years ago, McGaw and Watson described three specific problems that teachers face in teaching research methods. First, is the monumental problem of negligible student interest in empirical inquiry. "They [are] more concerned with the "important" substantive social and political problems of the day" (1976, vii). Secondly, texts on research methods are not particularly effective in meeting the needs of the students. While some books may effectively present isolated course topics, according to McGraw and Watson, no resources have "effectively integrated the various phases of empirical inquiry into a comprehensive

overview that an introductory student could understand and appreciate” (ibid). Third, these research methods texts ignore even basic principles of education (ibid). While these observations are old, they are not outdated. These issues continue to make it particularly difficult for teachers to successfully teach research methods courses.

“To be more interesting to students, teachers of research methods courses should actively engage students in participative exercises” (Hubbell 1994, 60). One way to actively engage students is to mirror the research process in the classroom (ibid). As Winn suggests, “[Students]. . . need to gain an understanding of how the various stages of research fit together in the research process” (1995, 204). Using participatory exercises allows students to become directly involved in their research, either as the administrator or the actual respondents. In this way it demonstrates to students that research is done in a rich context and is so much more than the set of methodological tools taught in the research methods classroom (ibid).

Regardless of the pedagogical approach, our courses should focus on making students “intelligent consumers of research” (Hubbell 1994, 60). For this reason, a strong emphasis is placed on research methods in almost every scientific field. One of the most common research method applications across the social sciences is survey research.

### ***Survey Research***

Survey research by definition is “a method of collecting standardized information by viewing a sample representative of some population” (McGaw and Watson 1976, 343). While it has not always been a reputable research method among social scientists, “the sample survey has been transformed from a brash, struggling, uncertain youngster into a mature, secure member of the establishment” (Rosenberg 1968, xi). Survey research is now one of the most widely utilized

methodological tools in the social sciences (McGraw and Watson 1976). It is a particularly prominent research tool in political science (Johnson and Joslyn 1995).

There are several strengths and weaknesses of survey research. In terms of strengths, surveys allow the collection of data from a large array of people, the generalizability of findings within margins of sampling error, and improvement by adjustment of the survey instrument. Yet survey research also has several weaknesses. Surveys can be costly in terms of resources, can produce artificial or biased results, and can demand sophistication on the part of the investigator (ibid).

### ***Teaching Survey Research***

Regardless of its weaknesses, survey research is a useful tool both outside and *inside* the classroom. As Cole suggests, “From the pedagogical experiential learning literature, advocates suggest that students would not only learn the course material better, but derive benefits extending past learning the course material” (2003, 245). Young further explains, “Adding a brief field project to political science classes injects excitement and stimulates an interest in course material” (1996, 11). Driven by this excitement over hands-on application, students “make the connection between theoretical knowledge and the real world” (Cole 2003, 245-246).

Survey research has additional pedagogical advantages. Quantitative data is quickly generated so students can begin analyzing the data before the end of the class or semester. It is also useful in illustrating the logic of causation and association (Ransford and Butler 1982). The comprehensiveness of the survey research method permits students to design, test, and analyze their findings in a relatively short amount of time. Many other methods of research are not as easily created or administered (Ransford and Butler 1982).

### *Surveys in Political Science*

Not only is survey research probably the most dominant research method in the social sciences, it is widely used throughout the discipline of political science (McGraw and Watson 1976). Survey research is used to obtain opinion data from voters, political elites, public officials, and administrators. It is used to evaluate policy performance, program effectiveness, and public opinion. Students of political science digest survey data throughout their programs of study and in the real political world in which they live. The prominence of this research methodology is demonstrated by its inclusion within major political science research methods texts (see Johnson and Reynolds 2004; McNabb 2004; Manheim et al. 2005; and Le Roy and Corbett 2005). While survey research is an invaluable tool to the political science scholar, the ability to critically examine the results of survey research has become indispensable to responsible students of politics both inside and outside of the university. As Johnson and Joslyn conclude,

Polls, surveys, and interview data have become so prevalent in American life that an awareness of the decisions made and problems encountered by survey researchers is necessary for rendering an independent judgment of conclusions drawn from such data (1995, 286).

### **Using Exit Polling to Teach Research Methods at UWF**

The exit poll project was incorporated into a class on campaigns and elections offered at the University of West Florida in the falls of 2004 and 2006. The University of West Florida is a regional comprehensive university located in Pensacola, Florida. It serves approximately 10,000 students in the area most of whom are commuters. The upper-division courses in the political science department are capped at 40 students, and these two courses enrolled 32 students in 2004 and 23 students in 2006.

The exit poll project was only worth 5% of the students' grade, but they were also granted the opportunity to do additional polling to earn extra credit. For the purposes of the

present analysis, this paper focuses largely on the exit poll experience of the campaigns and elections class of 2006. The experiences of this class are the most recent and were catalogued more thoroughly by two questionnaires administered to the students upon completion of the assignment.

The exit poll template used by this class was originally developed by Lauren Cohen Bell from Randolph Macon College and Kevin Smith from Ohio State University. In 2004, the University of West Florida was one of several schools administering the same basic exit poll to predict the 2004 presidential election outcomes in our respective areas. Individual schools were permitted to add questions to the template to address local issues and elections. This effort was not reported anywhere to our knowledge, and afterwards collaborative work among these universities ended.

Our 2006 exit poll consisted of 20 questions (see Appendix A). The first five questions centered on the Florida gubernatorial race and the U.S. House race for Florida's first congressional district. We did not focus on the U.S. Senate race because it was rather uncompetitive (Nelson v. Harris) for a statewide race. The survey also included several indicators of political orientation, including: issue priorities, partisanship, and ideology. Beyond these variables of interest, several socio-demographic indicators were included as control variables. As will be discussed later, the students added a few questions to the survey on electronic voting that were included before the controls. All together, the survey was a little more than a full page and was copied as a double-sided document for ease of administration.

### ***Student Involvement in Question Design***

In preparation for the exit poll project, the students reviewed the survey instrument in class. After we discussed the different types of questions involved in survey design as well as

the importance of question wording and sequence, we examined the exit poll template. A few students asked why we were not asking voters about voting machines. This issue had not been salient in the 2004 election cycle because many Florida precincts did not offer the option of electronic ballots. As part of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, Florida developed a timeline for electoral reform to be completed by the 2006 midterm election. One of the changes dictated by HAVA involved universal access to electronic voting machines.

At the students' leading, we clarified the issues related to electronic voting of interest to us as a class. The students wanted to know who was choosing to use the electronic voting machines and who was not. They wanted to know the reasons for and against using these new voting mechanisms. We worked together as a class to come up with three questions to ask voters in Escambia County on Election Day 2006. The three questions are presented in Table 1.

<b>Table 1: Questions Developed by Students for Exit Poll Survey Instrument</b>
Q11: Did you vote by an electronic ballot? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Q12: If yes, which of the following reasons helped in your decision? Please mark all that apply. <input type="checkbox"/> More reliable <input type="checkbox"/> More convenient <input type="checkbox"/> New technology <input type="checkbox"/> Other
Q13: If not, then which of the following reasons helped in your decision? Please mark all that apply. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't trust accuracy of results <input type="checkbox"/> Concerned about fraud <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure how to use <input type="checkbox"/> Habit <input type="checkbox"/> Other

These student-created questions illuminated a major discrepancy in the resources offered by the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections during convenience voting and the resources provided on Election Day. During convenience voting, voters had three polling places from

which to choose. These three sites were open during regular business hours Monday through Friday and for limited hours on Saturday the two weeks prior to Election Day 2006. Students who polled voters during convenience voting reported that voters were often upset by the survey questions concerning electronic voting machines. They were not offered the option of either a paper ballot or an electronic ballot. In fact, some voters actually finished the exit poll and re-entered the polling place to find out why they were required to use the new iVotronic touchscreen voting machines and not presented with the option of using a paper ballot. Through this experience, students realized firsthand the potential for interviewer bias.

### **Students as Researchers**

Before launching the exit poll project, we notified the UWF Institutional Review Board and obtained approval for research on human subjects. We then trained the students to participate in the project as interviewers. A few students were actively engaged in local campaigns and thus could not serve as exit pollsters because of a conflict of interest. To accommodate their special circumstances, we trained them to perform data entry and analysis.

We surveyed the electoral map of Escambia County and selected precincts that would be geographically, demographically, and politically diverse. A few students in the class volunteered to help outside of class to develop a list of precincts to target. These students (under the supervision of Dr. Evans) derived a list of 12 precincts out of a total population of 90 precincts to target on Election Day. These precincts are located at schools, churches, courthouses, and lodges all across town. We recognize that judgmental samples, such as this, lack the randomness necessary to achieve a high degree of external validity. However, we feel that the enhanced experience of the students provided through a purposive sample is worth the sacrifice of statistical rigor in this case.

To train students to work as exit pollsters, we examined the survey instrument, covered the directions to all of the selected polling places, reviewed the rules provided by the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections for those soliciting or polling outside a polling place, and discussed appropriate attire and behavior. We assembled packets for students to pick up at and drop off to a given location. The packets included directions, rules of conduct (see Appendix B), a letter to the precinct supervisor (see Appendix C), blank surveys, pencils, and a name badge. Students also picked up a few clip boards for use by respondents while filling out the survey.

We provided the students with name badges including the UWF logo to assist them in looking professional and to give voters a clear impression of their affiliation and purpose. In addition, we provided students with a letter to the precinct supervisor that detailed our project, suggested clearance by the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections Office, and provided contact information for Dr. Evans as the instructor supervising the project.

Students signed up for two hours of exit polling during convenience voting. They had the choice of three locations: the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections Office, the Lucia M. Tryon Branch Library, and the Southwest Branch Library. Students were further required to devote two hours to exit polling on Election Day at one of the 12 targeted precincts. For both of these assignments we used a sign-up sheet to prevent overlap. We suggested timeframes on the sign-up sheets that would likely lead to the most completed surveys, including the morning, noon, and afternoon rush hours. We instructed students to try to randomize their sample by selecting every third voter to exit the polling place.

### **Unexpected Events**

The project was also useful to demonstrate to students the unpredictable nature of applied research. In both 2004 and 2006, several unexpected events affected the students' experience in

administering the exit poll. On Election Day 2004, most of Escambia County had rain throughout the day. Students had to work harder to find participants for the exit poll.

As in 2004, students surveyed voters during convenience voting (the two weeks leading up to Election Day) as well as on Election Day 2006. In 2005, however, Florida passed a law to limit solicitation at the polls. This law placed a ban on exit polling within 100 feet of the polling place. Several news agencies challenged this law as well as similar laws in Ohio and Nevada. Convenience voting began on Monday, October 23, 2006. A few students had signed up to administer the survey the very first day. We encouraged them to check with the precinct supervisor to identify the 100-foot marker before beginning to approach voters. One student reported in class on Wednesday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, that on Monday he had been required to stand either on the back side of the parking lot or across the street from one of the three polling places for convenience voting. After three hours of trying to solicit responses, he returned his packet with only four completed surveys. Reflecting on the experience, he noted, "Picture me over 100 feet away from the door, watching voters walk in the other direction, freezing my butt off, physically chattering. . . 'AHH, democracy.'"

We began to fear that this experience would be shared by all of the students and would make this project an abysmal failure. An elderly student auditing the course raised his hand and reported that as a poll worker he received notification when election rules changed. He had been informed before coming to class that the 100-foot barrier had been removed.

On Tuesday, October 24, 2006, the second day of convenience voting in the state of Florida, a federal judge in Miami struck down the portion of the law restricting exit pollsters' access to the polls. Siding with the *Associated Press* and five television networks, the judge found the law to violate the networks' First Amendment rights to free speech and freedom of the

press. According to Anderson in an *AP* article released the same day, “U.S. District Judge Paul C. Huck said Florida’s law was unconstitutional and ordered state officials not to enforce it in the Nov. 7 election. He left intact the 100-foot limit for other activities such as distributing campaign material or peddling.”

This court decision came as a welcome surprise to the students. Unfortunately, it also came as a surprise to poll workers when students attempted to survey voters exiting the polling place within the 100-foot barrier. The Department of Government received several frantic calls by students who were in disagreement with poll supervisors on the appropriate place for exit polling. As one student noted in a questionnaire administered after the exit poll project, “both poll deputies were unsure about the 100 foot zone for exit polling.” Nonetheless, once the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections Office reminded poll workers of the ruling, students had little trouble administering the survey.

In one instance, however, a notification and reminder was still not enough to grant access to pollsters. As one student mentioned, “The poll deputy read the court case issue for exit polls and still thought I needed to stand 100 feet out.” For the most part, however, those who surveyed voters for the remainder of convenience voting and on Election Day had a much different experience and developed a firsthand appreciation of the interaction between the courts and the electoral process. When asked about the difference the court decision made in the practical implementation of exit polling, a student put it simply: “Well, it was nice being within sight of the friggin door.”

### **Exit Poll Results**

By the end of Election Day 2006, the class had compiled 674 surveys, including 324 convenience voters and 350 Election Day voters. Though we used a judgmental sample which

carries the disadvantage of lacking sampling error estimates (McGraw and Watson 1976), the class did consider the size of our sample in relation to a generous estimated voting population of 90,000 (approximately 50% of all registered voters) to come up with an expected margin of error of  $\pm 4\%$ .<sup>1</sup> On election night, the class gathered at a local restaurant to watch the election results and discuss the findings of our exit poll.

In the gubernatorial race, the class exit poll predicted Crist would take 63.7% of the vote and Davis would take 34.7% of the vote with a hypothetical  $\pm 4\%$  margin of error. In fact, Crist secured 59.1% of the vote in Escambia County. We were much closer to his percentage of the vote in Escambia County than his percentage of the vote statewide which was 52%.

In the congressional race, the class exit poll predicted Miller would take 67.1% of the vote and Roberts would take 32.5% of the vote with a hypothetical  $\pm 4\%$  margin of error. In fact, Miller secured 62.9% of the vote in Escambia County. While this number is just outside our hypothetical margin of error, the exit poll did more accurately reflect Miller's overall percentage of victory across the district. As mentioned previously, the class predicted he would win with 67.1% of the vote, and he actually won with 68.5% of the vote.

Not only did students enjoy watching the election results be tallied that night, they enjoyed observing the results of our exit poll take center stage on the local radio stations and television stations throughout the evening. Over dinner, we examined the overall outcomes of our exit poll, the correlations among issue priorities and candidate preferences, and the dominant voting demographics. Students shared notable stories of the day and soaked in the election night excitement.

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Escambia County had a voter turnout rate of 46.9% in the 2006 general election. Out of a total population of 187,489 registered voters in Escambia County, 87,864 voters showed up at the polls. It is good we were generous with our estimates.

## **Research Methodology Applications**

Though this exit poll exercise was utilized by a campaigns and elections class, we did explore various research methodology applications with students. The exercise was useful to expose students to most of the eight stages of survey research suggested by McGraw and Watson (1976).

1. Specifying research objectives.
2. Choosing the survey design.
3. Selecting the Sample
4. Designing the questionnaire.
5. Interviewing the sample.
6. Processing the data.
7. Analyzing the results.
8. Writing the report (343).

Not only did students learn firsthand the process of applied research, they also learned firsthand many of the principles of this methodology, including: question type, wording, and sequencing; sample size and margin of error; the role of the interviewer; and respondent bias.

### ***Survey Design***

Our survey was composed of nineteen closed-ended questions. They ran on the front and back of one single sheet of paper. This allowed us to ask all of our questions while keeping the survey to a limit of one page. Single-page surveys are cost-efficient and administratively effective. We used closed-ended questions to provide structured choices to voters. Close-ended questions are more appropriate for questionnaire-type surveys because they are easy and quick to answer (Johnson and Joslyn, 1995). There were also disadvantages to our design. The first disadvantage involved the double-sided questionnaire. As student administrators became overwhelmed at the polls, they would forget to remind the respondents about the back side of the survey. As a result we had incomplete polls submitted for our analysis. Closed-ended questions

unlike open-ended questions provided a discreet set of choices. Consequently, they can lead respondents to select an option with which they do not particularly agree (ibid).

In considering survey design, students also examined the types of variables included in survey instruments. Included in our survey instrument were both variables of interest and controls. In examining the control variables, we discussed the importance of capturing demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of respondents to ascertain voting trends among various populations within the community. We considered competing ranges for coding the self-identified income variable. We also examined the levels of variables, including: nominal, ordinal, and interval-level variables. Students identified both nominal and ordinal-level variables within our survey instrument and understood the utility of higher-level variables.

We also discussed as a class the relevance of sample size to the strength and generalizability of conclusions when conducting survey research. In the 2004 election, the class completed over 1100 surveys, providing us with a margin of error of  $\pm 3$ . In the 2006 election, a midterm election in a noncompetitive electoral context, the class completed 650 surveys, providing us with a margin of error of  $\pm 4$ . While our results were mostly within the margin of error, students recognized the wider range of predictions possible with such a limited sample size.

### ***Data Entry***

As mentioned previously, we employed students not only to administer the survey instrument, but also to enter and analyze the resulting data. Undergraduate students created the variables in SPSS. They further developed a coding scheme from the survey instrument and created their own value labels. Nearly all the data was entered by students. The majority of the Election Day 2006 exit polls were entered before 6:00pm CST so that the class could call the

election before polls closed at 7:00pm CST. Our results were solicited for the local news coverage of the election by radio and television outlets.

### ***Data Analysis***

After completing all of the data entry, we examined the results of the exit poll as a class. As part of our data analysis, we discussed the statistical concepts of correlation, significance, regression, and data reduction. We particularly focused on correlations between significant issues and voting behavior in the gubernatorial race and House race in Escambia County.

This data was particularly valuable to the students who actively participated on campaigns during the fall election season. One student, for example, was an assistant to the field director for Governor Charlie Crist. She asked for copies of the survey results to share with the campaign team. A few local candidates discovered we were conducting an exit poll and requested to see our results. Students expressed enthusiasm in class over the relevance of our work to the political world.

### **Student Evaluation of Exit Poll Experience**

In evaluating the experience, students filled out two questionnaires. The first set of questions asked them for feedback on several aspects of the experience, including: their expectations of the project, their retrospective evaluations of the project in light of their expectations, any problems they experienced in completing the project, their assessment of voter demographics and voter attitudes towards the survey, and the impact of the project on their own feelings towards exit polls and political engagement generally. The results of this diagnostic tool are presented in the section on Student Evaluations. We asked students in a separate questionnaire a number of open-ended questions concerning the research method applications of the exit poll exercise. Specific questions addressed concepts such as: designing a survey

instrument, interviewer bias, respondent bias, and sampling. See Appendix D for the open-ended questionnaire on research methods applications.

### *The Survey Instrument*

We first asked students, “In participating in the exit poll, what (if anything) did you learn about survey design?” While responses varied, several students suggested that they did learn important principles of survey design. Several students noted the importance of brevity and question sequencing. The following statements are taken from their responses.

- People don’t like two pages.
- That people tend to pick the first issues on the sheet if they were in a rush.
- Try to fit everything on the front of the page; people do not look at the back.
- It is important to not clutter the survey, to keep it [in a] simple format.

Our survey instrument was slightly more than a page long. See Appendix A for the full survey. We used double-sided copies of the survey to save paper and hassle. Even though the students were instructed to remind respondents to turn the survey over to answer a few remaining questions, several students returned with incomplete surveys.

The questionnaire also probed student learning concerning question wording. Several students identified the importance of question wording to survey results. They saw the importance of avoiding vague, complex, or leading questions. Some of their comments were:

- Questions must not be leading and be as neutral as possible. The better the question, the better the answer will be to use in the stats.
- Keep it simple – most people are not that politically savvy.
- That just a few words interchanged can completely affect the outcome.
- I learned that a question’s wording can change a person’s answer.
- Vagueness can confuse voters, and some wording can be offensive.
- You can “lead” people to give you the results you want by the wording of a question.

A separate question asked students about the types of questions that are included in surveys and their utility. While a few students had already demonstrated knowledge of this

concept in answers to the first question, several suggested this exercise had given them a better understanding of question type and levels of measurement. Some students stated:

- I now understand the difference between nominal, ordinate and interval level variables.
- Some are aimed at demographic predictors, and some are aimed at behavior and ideology.
- [You should present the] most important questions first and demographic questions last.

Students clearly recognized the difference between variables of interest and controls. Another student commented that the one thing he or she learned about survey design was the “importance of demographic information.”

### ***The Role of the Interviewer***

Judging by the sheer number and diversity of student responses, the class learned several important principles concerning the role of the interviewer in the administration of a survey.

First, they learned that pollsters are critically responsible for the size and character of the response rate. One student noted: “You have to be easily approachable.” Another commented, “They (exit pollsters) have to in a sense be salesmen to present the poll in a manner that people will respond to.” Some students found new skills they did not even know they possessed. A student reflected on the experience, “You had to be approachable and talk fast to get them to believe that it is anonymous and for educational purposes.” Another stated: “I had to flash that charm, because people already were cautious.”

Secondly, students learned that interviewers hold the potential for biasing respondents. As one student commented, “The pollster is the mind behind the survey; they must administer the polls. Some have bias and can skew results or questions to what they need. Having a likable, neutral pollster helps to get better results.” Not only did students see the potential for bias in the administration of the polls but also in the selection of respondents. One student stated: “The pollster can influence the outcome if he/she does not obtain a random sample.”

Third, they realized the importance of the credibility of the pollster to the legitimacy of the survey. A student remarked: “Pollsters needed to explain why and for whom the exit poll was [being administered].” Not only did students find it necessary to be prepared for questions concerning the purpose of the survey, they also found it necessary to establish credibility through their demeanor. Another student commented: “The role of the pollster, i.e. their appearance, their attitude, and their personality, is very key in getting people to “trust” taking the survey.”

Part of this demeanor involved appearing objective. Several students noted the importance of objectivity. For example, one stated: “It is important for the pollster to look as non-partisan as possible and look professional and indifferent.” Another remarked, “We as pollsters become non-partisan.” And another said, “The pollster must at all times project an image of neutrality and competence.” Finally, students gained a deeper respect for the job of pollsters. One student summarized: “It is not as easy as it seems!” These comments all suggest the importance of rapport, appearance, behavior, and practice in conducting successful interviews (McGaw and Watson 1976).

Students also expressed an understanding of respondent bias. One student stated: “Instead people will write what they think you want to hear so you have to be as neutral as possible to protect the results of your survey.” Others remarked:

- Some people were afraid that I was going to judge them on the way they voted and their income
- Many people seemed to just fill out the survey nonchalantly but a few like to hide answers or not answer at all.

### ***Sampling***

Students participated to varying degrees in selecting the sample of precincts for the exit poll. Nonetheless, a number of students pointed out several issues involved in sampling. Many students noted the importance of representativeness.

- Getting a sample takes planning ahead to find different areas that can represent all constituencies. Its also difficult to find different groups of people
- Getting people to participate is crucial – also must be careful about which precincts to choose some are heavily biased and may bias your survey (e.g., Pensacola Christian College).
- In some [precincts] there are many people who are the same party and not many of the other so your numbers can be off.

Students recognized that not only is it important to consider the representativeness of the precincts selected, but it is also critical to consider the representativeness of the sample of respondents selected at the individual precincts. What follows are some of the comments offered by students when asked to convey what they learned concerning the difficulties in capturing a random sample.

- The difficulties were perhaps the same type of age bracket or ideology kept coming to vote one after another so trying to calculate who to target while not stereotyping or assuming their vote was hard to call.
- I learned that it is often difficult to get anyone to fill out a survey which makes it difficult to capture a random sample.
- There are certain types of people who will and will not fill out your poll. So it is hard to get a varied group.
- Some areas are prominent in certain demographics, and sometimes certain demographics are more dependent to take the poll.
- The difficulties include proven evidence of certain voters showing up at different times, places and even weather conditions
- It is very difficult especially when voter turnout is low.

Though this class was not a research methods class, we did briefly discuss the relationship between the sample size and the margin of error. This concept was important to understanding the generalizability of our findings. When asked to convey their understanding of these concepts, students stated:

- The larger the sample sizes the better the results. You want a small margin of error and this decreases with a larger sample number. Also a large sample number will probably have a more diverse population.
- I took an AP statistics class in high school, so I had a general idea, but the survey definitely emphasized increased or larger sample size to ensure a [lower] margin of error.
- A larger sample size will give a better, closer answer and the margin while still present will be smaller.
- The larger your sample size the more accurately it reflects the general population.

## **Student Expectations versus Reality**

Overwhelmingly students suggested that this project changed how they view exit polls, voting, political engagement, and the electoral process. These sentiments were captured by the additional questionnaire students completed following the exit poll experience (see Appendix E). In the following section, we describe student expectations prior to the exit poll project, as well as specific themes stemming from their responses concerning the impact of this project on their own attitudes toward civic engagement. Student responses to the exit poll experience are captured within the following themes: experiences with election workers, observation of who votes, attitudes about exit polls, promotion of civic engagement, and overall evaluation of the exit poll experience.

### ***Student Expectations Prior to Project***

Students had very different expectations of the exit poll project. As might be expected, a few students expressed boredom and dread over the assignment.

- Honestly, I was expecting to be that annoying solicitor preying upon unsuspecting voters.
- I was expecting it to be very painful. I thought there would be a lot of resistance to the polling.
- [I was expecting] to collect information for the University from somewhat (reluctant) unwilling participants.
- I did not have any [expectations], except that I thought it would be boring.
- [I was] a little nervous, as I am pretty nervous especially about asking personal questions.

Other students had no preconceived notions of the project. One student stated, “I actually went into this project with an open mind.” Another reflected, “I had no real expectations; I’d never done anything like this before.” A final group of students were excited by the prospects of participating in a class exit poll for the purpose of calling the election. A student noted: “I thought it would be easier (was not), and I expected it to be fun (it was!). Also I wanted to see how the similar the exit polls are to the actual results.”

### ***Good Experience with Election Office and Poll Workers***

Students were unanimously pleased with their experience with the county supervisor of elections office as well as those working at the precincts. Several made comments similar to this one: “All of the people at the courthouse and David Stafford’s office (Escambia County Supervisor of Elections) were really nice and helpful. People working at the precincts were very helpful.” A few students provided in-class examples of being assisted in their project by the poll workers. One precinct worker charged with passing out the “I Voted” stickers to voters as they left the building told the UWF students administering the exit poll to sit next to her so that when voters came to get their sticker they would immediately think to fill out the survey. Not all students had such a perfect situation, of course, but even those that had less than an ideal situation found the poll workers to be very friendly. One student described such a situation: “The poll workers were nice, but the situation kind of sucked. I was placed out back of the school cafeteria 10 feet from the dumpster. Workers were walking out with trash the whole time.” Overall, students expressed great satisfaction with their interactions with local government in carrying out this project. In fact, one student even commented, “One of the poll workers gave me a rose!”

### ***Who Votes...?***

One of the benefits of exposing college students to the polling place on Election Day is that it clearly impresses on them the demographics of voting in this country and this county. After completing the project, several students voiced disappointment over low election turnout. They were honestly surprised by how slow the polling places were on Election Day. They were particularly dismayed over the low number of young people they saw turning out to vote. One student stated: “It made me even madder at the young adults that don’t vote and don’t know anything about politics.” Like this student, others expressed frustration over general apathy and

ignorance. “People are lazy and don’t want to be involved, and, when they walk out [of the polling place], they don’t even remember how they just voted.”

Other students, however, seemed encouraged by those they saw voting. One student noted, “I realized that people are much more engaged than I thought.” They further developed an appreciation for the investment of participating in the political process. Speaking generally about campaigns and elections, a student reflected: “I realized how difficult and time consuming being a part of this can be.”

On a local level, students came face-to-face with who votes in their community. Several student experiences demonstrate the dominantly conservative politics of this area. Students encountered card-carrying members of the NRA. A student claimed,

I had a guy in an NRA hat tell me that I was going to manipulate his answers to serve my “liberal cause.” I did my best to explain to him in a very professional way that, that was a ridiculous scenario. He didn’t get it. He just wanted me to know that he wasn’t going to support my attempt to take his guns away.

Students also encountered evangelicals who took the chance encounter as an opportunity to proselytize. A student reported, “One girl told me she would fill out my survey if I would promise to read a track.”

Interestingly, most of the anti-liberal sentiments expressed by voters were directed at the university. Students reported the following voter comments:

- I had one woman tell me that she hoped there weren’t any liberal professors at UWF and that she would only fill out a poll for me because I wasn’t associated with the liberal media. And then, right after that, told me I should think for myself. It was an interesting conversation.
- There was a crazy older man who strictly warned be about all the liberal teachers that lurk around waiting to pounce on students. He told me not to listen to them ever.

The demographic discoveries of students were not just political in nature. Some students developed a better awareness of the racial diversity of their community. One student stated, “I was surprised by the predominantly black voter population at Wedgewood Middle School.”

### ***Promoting Civic Engagement***

When asked whether this experience influenced their perspectives on voting, political engagement, or the electoral process, students suggested that the project had influenced their feelings concerning civic engagement. One student admitted that he or she “was not interested at all before.” Yet other students entered into this project with a clear appreciation of civic engagement. This project only reaffirmed their interest. One student said, “It is always fun for me to see democracy at work. It is exciting to me - so many volunteers and the pride voters carry away from the polls.” Finally, some students recognized through this exercise the widespread lack of civic engagement among their peers. This feeling was succinctly summarized by this student comment: “The main thing I noticed is how few young voters I experienced. It made me realize how important it is to get out and represent my age group.”

### ***Student Opinion of Exit Polls***

The project also had a significant impact on student attitudes concerning exit polls. After completing the project, the vast majority of students voiced greater appreciation for polls and pollsters. Given the centrality of this question to our analysis, we have included most of the students’ responses below.

- I would be much more willing to help pollsters.
- I believe if conducted right without bias, exit polls can be fairly accurate.
- I see how important they are and would encourage more to participate.
- I realized how much work it actually is.
- I will definitely fill out exit polls in the future.
- It put exit polls in a more positive light for me.
- It made me feel sorry for pollsters.
- I would be much more willing to do an exit poll if asked.
- I like exit polls now.
- I will definitely help exit pollsters now.
- I have more appreciation for people giving polls/surveys now; it is more difficult than it seems.
- Now I would actually stop to help someone by filling out an exit poll.
- I will fill them out now.
- I will always participate when asked.
- I realized how much harder it was than it seemed.

- It is different to actually be the one asking “for your time;” I didn’t realize that it took humility and could be embarrassing at times.
- When I went to my precinct I looked for an exit pollster so I could take one, but there was no one polling.
- Exit polls are extremely valuable when analyzing the race after Election Day. They help you see in what areas you were strong and weak and where more attention needs to be paid.
- I was surprised at how easy this actually was. People were very friendly with helping and even excited.
- It was awesome to see some of our poll data fall within the margin of error.

### ***Overall Student Evaluations***

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked students to provide an overall evaluation of the project. There was not a single negative evaluation. One student suggested that we include the school logo on the survey in future years, but his or her overall assessment was nonetheless positive. Given that this student feedback might be of particular interest to our readership, we have listed most of their responses to this assessment item as well.

- I really enjoyed the project. It is nice to see the survey process in action.
- I really enjoyed it a lot and learned more than I thought I would.
- Lots of fun. . . eye opener.
- This project was very informative.
- I have been absolutely enthralled with how fascinating [it was].
- Great. Enjoyed it. Do it again.
- It wasn’t half as bad as I was expecting. I almost enjoyed parts of it.
- It was fun.
- I thought it was very interesting because I was surprised at how many people took the polls and the issues they based their votes on - also the fact that they didn’t understand questions.
- It was a good project. I learned many people’s feelings about the whole voting process and the election process in general.
- I enjoyed the experience. I would do it again.
- I learned that in the future I should wear comfortable shoes.
- [I] will be more compelled to stop and fill out an exit poll. Some people were not polite.
- Overall it was interesting to interact with voters although my participation in the actual election process was still quite limited.
- It was a good experience.
- It was a good experience.
- It was insightful, because I wanted to know how it was done; however, it was much more difficult getting people to do the poll. Overall it was a fun learning experience.
- It was fun to speak with voters and try to stereotype people before I saw their polls.
- Enjoyed it immensely. It was interesting to discuss the poll with the voters and hear their predictions.
- The project was great because it will provide students with a picture of the voting public and why they vote a certain way. It will also allow campaigns an accessible piece of information in order to determine why they won or lost and what issues voters care about.

## **Conclusion**

The results of our exit poll project administered by students in the 2004 and 2006 election cycles suggest that exit polls are an effective pedagogical tool for teaching both research methods and civic engagement. In terms of research methods, this exercise is useful in demonstrating the process of applied research as well as the important principles related to survey methodology. Throughout this project, students were engaged in survey design, sample selection, survey administration, data entry, and data analysis. Upon completion of this project, students demonstrated familiarity with concepts concerning survey research, including: question type, wording, and sequencing; sample size and margin of error; the role of the interviewer; and respondent bias. In addition to their research methods applications, exit polls promote civic engagement among students. Those students who participated in our exit poll had favorable views towards government, exit polls, and voting after completing the assignment. While it is difficult to draw causation, several of the students explicitly pointed to the exit poll experience as responsible for these favorable views.

In sum, given that our experience with the exit poll assignment has been in courses designed to teach campaigns and elections, we find great potential for using this tool to teach students the mechanics of survey research methodology. The student responses to our two open-ended assessment tools provide insight into the relationship between this exercise and student learning. Our findings fit well with what the pedagogical experiential learning literature advances and offer a further possible avenue for making students “intelligent consumers of research” (Hubbell 1994, 60).

## References

- Anderson, Curt. October 24, 2006. Judge rules on exit polls in Florida. *Associated Press*. Accessed on January 27, 2007 from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/24/AR2006102400934.html>.
- Cole, Alexandra. 2003. Survey or not to survey: The use of exit polling as a teaching tool. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36(2): 245-252.
- Hubbell, Larry. 1994. "Teaching Research Methods: An Experiential and Heterodoxical Approach." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27(1): 60-64.
- Johnson, Janet B., and Richard A. Joslyn. 1995. *Political Science Research Methods*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Washington, D.C.: C.Q. Press.
- Johnson, Janet B., and H. T. Reynolds. 2004. *Political Science Research Methods*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, D.C.: C.Q. Press.
- Le Roy, Michael K., and Michael Corbett. 2005. *Research Methods in Political Science: An Introduction Using MicroCase Explorer*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Wadsworth.
- McGaw, Dickinson, and George Watson. 1976. *Political and Social Inquiry*. New York: Wiley.
- McNabb, David. 2004. *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods*. M.E. Sharpe.
- Manheim, J. arrol B., Rich, Richard C., Willnat, Lars, and Craig L. Burns. 2005. *Empirical Political Analysis: Research Methods in Political Science*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Longman.
- Ransford, H. Edward, and Gerald Butler. 1982. "Teaching Research Methods in the Social Sciences." *Teaching Sociology* 9(3): 291-312.
- Rosenberg, Morris. 1968. *The Logic of Survey Analysis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Winn, Sandra. 1995. "Learning by Doing. Teaching Research Methods Through Student Participation in a Commissioned Research Project." *Studies in Higher Education* 20: 203-215.
- Young, Rosalie R. 1996. "Brief Field Experiences: An Instructional Tool for Undergraduate Political Science Classes." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24: 695-696.

## Appendix B: Rules for Exit Polling

### RULES FOR EXIT POLLING

**POLL DATES: Monday, October 23 – Tuesday, November 7**

1. Check the time that you are to participate in the poll.
2. **On the day of the poll:** Each pollster should report to Dr. Evans' office approximately 10-15 minutes **prior** to the start time for his/her participation. (If you are in class immediately prior, you may report as quickly as possible after the class lets out.) **Upon arriving at Dr. Evans' office, you will be asked to check out the exit poll materials that you will be using.** **Note: ALL participants must "sign in" prior to beginning the poll and must "sign out" after concluding your service. This policy is to ensure that all participants receive appropriate credit and/or extra credit for participating in the poll.**

All participants should be certain that they have in their possession the following items before leaving to participate in the exit poll:

- Plastic Credential Badge
  - Letter of introduction from Dr. Evans
  - 2 Clipboards
  - Surveys
  - Pens/Pencils
  - Directions to the polling place
  - Rules for administering poll
  - Spare envelope
3. Once you have been given the "go ahead" from Dr. Evans or from one of the students working the office, proceed to the polling place to which you have been assigned. (**Note: Directions to ALL precincts will be made available.**)
  4. At the polling place, present the letter from Dr. Evans that is in your materials packet to the precinct officials and proceed to a point outside the polling place that is outside the 100-foot buffer zone. **If you are uncertain about where it is okay to stand, ASK THE PRECINCT WORKER TO WHOM YOU PRESENTED YOUR CREDENTIAL LETTER.**
- NOTE: YOU MUST WEAR YOUR CREDENTIAL BADGE AT ALL TIMES WHILE ADMINISTERING THE EXIT POLL.**
5. Once you have positioned yourself, you can begin the process of administering the poll:
    - You should attempt to ask **every third voter** if he/she would be willing to take just a few moments to complete a survey sponsored by the University of West Florida.

- If a respondent has a question about any aspect of the poll, do your best to answer it politely. **Use your best judgment.** Remember:
  - ❖ The poll is **COMPLETELY** anonymous. We won't know who they are or have any identifying information about the respondents who agree to participate. You may need to tell potential respondents this to alleviate their concerns.
  - ❖ The data collected will be used for academic and scholarly purposes **ONLY**. (Some data will be used for scholarly research projects.)
  - ❖ If a person is uncomfortable answering a specific question, encourage him or her to complete the survey in its entirety, but do not force them to answer the offensive question.
  
- **Remember, ALWAYS be polite and courteous: You are representing the university.**
  
- 6. Once you have completed the number of surveys you were assigned to complete, **RETURN THE COMPLETED SURVEYS to Dr. Evans' office.**

If, for any reason, you are not able to return to immediately following the conclusion of your exit poll participation, you **MUST** phone in your results **IMMEDIATELY UPON CONCLUDING YOUR PARTICIPATION.** This phone line can be used for this purpose: 474-2660.
  
- 7. Upon returning your surveys you will need to "sign out" on the same list that you used when you signed in prior to participating in the poll. This indicates that you have fulfilled your polling responsibilities.
  
- 8. **NOTE: Students who fail to return their surveys by 7:00 PM on Tuesday, November 7 or phone in the results by that same time WILL NOT RECEIVE CREDIT for participating in the exit poll.**

## **Appendix C: Sample Letter to Precinct Supervisors**

To Whom It May Concern:

The student that is in possession of this letter is participating in an official exit poll sponsored by the University of West Florida's Department of Political Science. The student has agreed to abide by all rules and regulations of the Escambia County Electoral Board, and has participated in a training session. The student has agreed to act in a professional and courteous manner at all times. Students will stop random voters to ask for their help in completing a brief questionnaire. No one will be forced to participate, and no respondent will be asked to identify him/herself with a name or other identifying information.

Please contact Dr. Jocelyn Jones Evans at 525-2567 if there are any questions about the polling project or to report any problems or concerns.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jocelyn Jones Evans  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Government  
University of West Florida

## **Appendix D: Student Questionnaire on Exit Poll Experience**

What were your expectations for this project?

What are your evaluations of the project now that you have completed it?

Did you experience any problems at your polling precinct?

If you polled before the Federal court decision requiring that pollers stay 100 feet from the voting areas, how did the experience differ before and after the decisions?

Were you surprised in any way by the precinct you chose?

What was the attitude of those that you were polling?

What was the attitude of those you were polling?

Did you have a feeling that you were aggravating voters you asked to poll or interfering with the voting process?

Did you find any trends in the demographic characteristics of the voters who agreed to participate?

Did this experience influence your perspective on exit polls?

Did this experience influence your perspective on voting, political engagement or the electoral process?

Are there any other stories or interesting encounters you had while polling that you would like to share?

## **Appendix E: Student Questionnaire on Research Methods Applications of Exit Poll Project**

In participating in the exit poll, what (if anything) did you learn about survey design?

In participating in the exit poll, what (if anything) did you learn about question wording?

What (if anything) did you learn about the types of variables that are included in a survey and their utility?

What (if anything) did you learn about the role of the pollster in the administration of the exit poll?

What (if anything) did you learn about the difficulties in capturing a random sample?

What (if anything) did you learn about the potential for respondent bias?

What (if anything) did you learn about the importance of sample size and the margin of error?