First in the Nation

Lessons learned from New Hampshire

By Andrew E. Smith and Clark Hubbard

On February 1, 2000, voters in New Hampshire cast their ballots in the First in the Nation Presidential primary. Vice President Al Gore defeated former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley 50% to 46% in the Democratic primary, and Arizona Senator John McCain topped the Republican candidates with 49% of the vote. Texas Governor George W. Bush received 30%, businessman Steve Forbes received 13%, Alan Keyes received 6%, and Gary Bauer got 1%.[1]

However, pre-election polls forecast a very different result. In 2000, at least 10 organizations conducted polls in New Hampshire. Most predicted the eventual winners, but the winning margins were considerably off the mark. In the Democratic primary, these polls had Gore comfortably defeating Bradley by an average of 51% to 42%. On the Republican side, these same polls showed (on average) McCain with 40% of the vote, Bush with 32%, Forbes with 13%, Keyes with 7%, and Bauer with 1% (see Table 1). The average error, as measured by the difference between the predicted vote and the actual vote, was 6.5% in the Democratic primary and 15% in the Republican primary.

As pollsters well know, election prediction is perhaps the only time that survey data can actually be compared to "real" data, and it is often used as a measure of how "good" a survey shop is. With this in mind, what happened in the 2000 New Hampshire primary? Why did the polls fare so poorly in predicting the vote?

A large part of the New Hampshire election polling story is the nature of the state's primary process. New Hampshire has a semi-open primary in which both registered partisans and undeclared voters can vote. Undeclared voters declare themselves as either Republicans or Democrats at their polling place and vote in that party's primary. Voters then have the option of returning to undeclared status after casting a ballot. Calling undeclared voters "independents" is misleading as most have partisan leanings. When asked a standard party identification question in a WMUR-TV/Fox News/University of New Hampshire track-ing poll, 38% of undeclared voters identified as Republicans, 33% as Democrats, and 29% said they were independents.

Undeclared voters get the benefit of choosing which primary to vote in. Participation rules make it *practical* for undeclared voters to cast a ballot in the primary of their choice, while the "high-stimulus" nature of the campaigns in this state make it relatively *likely* that a large proportion of them will do so. For example, registered Democrats who wanted to vote for McCain would have to go to their town hall at least a month before the election and change their registration to Republican. A Democrat responding to McCain's campaign in the final month could, at best, give McCain a write-in vote in the Democratic primary, essentially wasting their vote

---
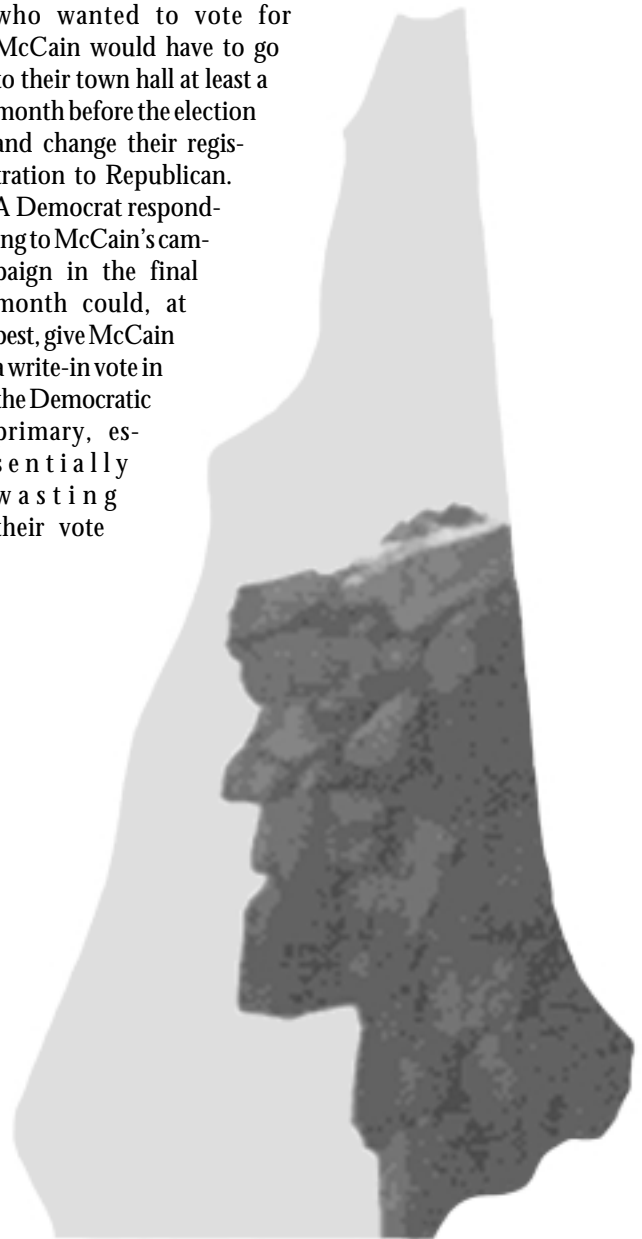
Andrew E. Smith is director, University of New Hampshire Survey Center, and Clark Hubbard is assistant professor, department of political science, University of New Hampshire.

(although 3,320 did just that!). An undeclared voter could respond to the same appeal on the day of the election and cast a *real* vote in the Republican election.

Undeclared voters share the general behavioral characteristics of classic "swing" voters: they have partisan leanings but are not strong party identifiers, they tend to be ideologically moderate, generally less interested in politics and less likely to participate unless stimulated to do so.[2] In every election since 1980, the candidate preference profile of undeclared participants is distinct from the profile of partisan participants. The ideological profile of this bloc is distinct as well—undeclared primary participants are consistently more moderate than their partisan counterparts. The trick, from a forecasting perspective, is predicting the partisan direction of participation, as well as vote choice.

Election-specific factors are paramount for explaining (and therefore predicting) the behavior of the undeclared bloc.

Undeclared participation has ranged from a low of 16% of the total votes cast in the 1992 Republican primary to a high of 30% of the total votes cast in that year's Democratic primary.[3] Undeclared voters appear spurred to participate by the contested or uncontested nature of a party's nomination race, by the presence or absence of particularly appealing candidates, the state of the economy, or by other election-specific factors. The unique electoral context of the New Hampshire primary acts to make this group a wild-card in predicting the outcome.

Early polls, in New Hampshire and nationwide, predicted Al Gore and George W. Bush as the eventual nominees. But both Gore and Bush hit a "speed-bump" in New Hampshire that temporarily slowed their coronation march.

Both Gore and Bush waited perhaps too long to begin serious campaigning in New Hampshire, making time and media space available for insurgent campaigns. And Bill Bradley and

Table 1

Off the Mark in New Hampshire: Primary Results and the Final Pre-Election Calls

Date	Actual vote 2/1	American Research Group 1/29-31	Boston Globe/WBZ by KRC 1/29-30	Boston Herald/ WCVB by RKM 1/30-31	CBS 1/28-30	Gallup/ CNN/*USA Today* 1/30-31	UMass 1/29-30	WMUR/ FOX/UNH 1/28-31	WNDS by Franklin Pearce 1/27-30	Quinnipiac College 1/27-30	Zogby/ Reuters/ WHDH-TV 1/30-31
Republican Race											
McCain	49%	36%	38%	40%	39%	44%	37%	41%	40%	39%	44%
Bush	30	36	34	29	35	32	28	34	29	29	32
Forbes	13	16	13	11	10	13	15	13	15	12	14
Keyes	6	5	5	10	6	7	7	8	5	10	9
Bauer	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
Other/ Undecided	1	5	7	9	9	3	12	4	9	10	0
McCain Lead	19	0	4	11	4	12	9	7	11	10	12
Democratic Race											
Gore	50%	51%	48%	48%	55%	54%	45%	49%	47%	53%	56%
Bradley	46	45	42	43	39	42	44	46	41	36	44
Other/ Undecided	5	4	10	9	6	4	11	5	11	11	0
Gore Lead	4	6	6	5	16	12	1	3	6	17	12

Courtesy of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

John McCain made good use of this time. Bradley in particular, began campaigning in New Hampshire in the winter of 1999 and assembled an efficient campaign staff which conducted an effective shoe leather campaign throughout the spring and summer. By mid-fall, Bradley had built up considerable momentum, pulling ahead of Gore in many polls. Gore was forced back to Tennessee for re-tooling, and the "new" Gore was able to fight back, attacking Bradley on many fronts. Gore regained the momentum and, by mid-January, looked to defeat Bradley easily.

McCain took a slightly different tack, but also spent considerable time in New Hampshire, talking with voters at 114 town hall meetings throughout the summer and fall. While Buhr argues that the value of retail politics in New Hampshire is exaggerated,[4] the *appearance* of running a retail campaign is very important. Bush did not run a retail campaign in New Hampshire. And he compounded this mistake by choosing to skip the first two Republican debates, which provide a key early opportunity for candidates to present a favorable impression to potential primary voters.[5] This gave his opponents, particularly McCain, a chance to present themselves and define Bush as somewhat of a lightweight. Bush was never able to recover and continued to trail McCain throughout the campaign.

Both McCain and Bradley were successful in part because they made overt appeals to undeclared voters. Their "campaign finance summit" was a cross-party attempt to bring in non-partisan voters and both candidates ran as "insurgents," against their party's anointed candidate.

So why did the polls fair so poorly? One possible explanation is that there was a massive last-minute shift to McCain. However, none of the 6 tracking polls (most of which interviewed up to the day before election) showed any large late shifts, but found instead a small, steady increase in support for McCain. The WMUR-TV/FOX News/UNH, CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup, and Reuters/WHDH-TV/Zogby tracking polls all showed McCain widening his lead over Bush, but not dramatically. Interestingly, the University of Massachusetts tracking poll showed the race actually tightening and the ARG tracking poll had Bush leading.

Exit poll data also fail to provide compelling evidence of a last minute McCain shift. The Voter News Service exit poll reports that 14% of the GOP electorate made their decision on election day, but McCain held only a 10-percentage point lead over Bush among this group, nowhere near enough to explain his 19-percentage point victory margin.

In the Democratic race, tracking polls had mixed success detecting a late shift toward Bradley. The WMUR-TV/FOX News/UNH and University of Massachusetts tracking polls detected a late shift, but the ARG tracking poll showed no movement and the CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup and Reuters/WHDH/Zogby tracking polls showed Gore's lead widening. Overall, tracking polls provide contradictory evidence of a late shift to Bradley.

Both VNS and *Los Angeles Times* exit polls show late deciders were significantly more likely to vote for Bradley than Gore, evidence of a late shift that went undetected by many tracking polls.

"What happened in the 2000 New Hampshire primary? Why did the polls fare so poorly in predicting the vote?"

Perhaps a more plausible explanation for why the pre-election polls missed the McCain landslide, and why most missed the narrow Gore win, is how potential voters are selected for inclusion in pre-election surveys. While we cannot speak for methods used by other organizations, we believe we have identified two places in the WMUR-TV/FOX News/UNH tracking poll where significant numbers of likely voters may have been excluded from our samples.

In 1996, 26,655 non-registered voters in New Hampshire registered on election day. In the 2000 primary, that number jumped to 38,642, comprising 10% of the electorate. In the WMUR/FOX News/UNH poll, we used a variation of the "last birthday" method for random respondent selection that specifically asked to speak with a registered voter—"In order to determine who to interview, could you tell me, of the registered voters who currently live in your household, who had the most recent birthday." If the selected respondent indicated that they were not registered to vote, but planned to vote anyway, they were included in the sample. Otherwise, they were excluded. Just over 1% of our tracking poll samples consisted of these walk-up voters instead of the 10% who actually voted, meaning that our introduction alone excluded 9% of the overall electorate and *90% of the walk-up vote*! If we make the reasonable assumption that walk-up voters behave similarly to undeclared voters, 68% would vote in the GOP primary of which 53% would vote for McCain and 21% for Bush. Their impact would be considerably smaller in the Democratic primary, as undeclared voters split 51% for Bradley and 48% for Gore.

The increasing number of undeclared voters also poses a problem for election prediction. In 2000, 37% of registered voters were undeclared, up from 28% in 1996. As discussed above, undeclared voters have to make two related decisions; which primary to vote in and which candidate to vote for. The last question in our likely voter screener was "Do you intend to vote in the Republican primary or the Democratic primary?" While most undeclared voters indicated a preference, fully 16% said they were undecided. Working under the assumption that voters who said they did not know which primary they would vote in were not likely to vote, potential voters who answered "don't know" to this question were excluded from the survey.

In hindsight, we should have included these potential voters in our sample. If they had been included, and if they voted the way other undeclared voters did (McCain, 36%; Bush 15%; Bradley, 16%; Gore, 15%), McCain would have picked up a significant number of additional predicted votes.

A factor that made it especially difficult to forecast the 2000 outcome was that undeclared voters turned out at significantly higher rates than they had in the past. In 1996, turnout for "undeclareds" was 34% of those registered to vote, but it jumped to 40% in 2000. The historically volatile nature of these voters makes it difficult to predict both turnout and vote intention.

The New Hampshire primary is very different from primary elections in other states—it is a semi-open primary with high voter interest and high turnout. A situation with viable candidates in both parties campaigning as outsiders and consciously competing for undeclared voters may have been unique to 2000. Nevertheless, we believe that there are lessons to be learned for anyone forecasting primary elections.

First, we think that is essential to understand the political culture of the state in question. New Hampshire has a history of supporting "insurgent" candidates and also has a history of undeclared voters behaving quite differently than registered partisans. Also, election laws vary considerably from state to state as does the contested nature of the campaign and attendant voter interest. Pollsters must have a firm understanding of the historical behavior of their state's electorate as well as the current campaign context.

Second, we believe that excluding approximately 90% of the walk-up vote from our sample is a major reason support for McCain was significantly underestimated. We strongly recommend using a respondent selection script which does not refer only to registered voters, but instead makes clear to potential respondents that if they intend to register on election day, they should participate in the survey.

Third, we believe that excluding 16% of the undeclared vote also is a source of prediction error. Historically, undeclared voters have gravitated to one of the primaries because of election-specific factors such as how close the contested election is, candidate efforts to woo their vote, and other contextual factors such as the economy. Voters who can legally vote in either primary should not be excluded from samples simply because they say they don't know which primary they will vote in. At a minimum, we suggest asking these respondents which candidate they plan to vote for out of a list of all potential candidates, if only to help understand the dynamics of the election.

This post-election analysis of our methods has helped us understand what happened in the 2000 New Hampshire primary. Even this review, however, does not completely explain our own performance, let alone that of others. Although the WMUR-TV/FOX News/UNH tracking poll had one of the lowest overall errors of the ten polls conducted in New Hampshire, our accuracy must improve. A better understanding of the historical and election-specific forces at work will help insure proper sample selection and thereby, more accurate predictions in the future.

Endnotes

[1] All election data come from the *State of New Hampshire Manual for the General Court* or from the New Hampshire State Department.

[2] For a classic discussion of the "swing" vote, see V.O. Key, Jr., especially *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961) or *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1966).

[3] Historical exit poll data are from the CBS News/*New York Times* Election Surveys, 1980; Voter Research and Surveys Presidential Primary Exit Polls, 1992; Voter News Service Presidential Primary Exit Polls, 1996.

[4] T. Buhr, "What Voters Know about the Candidates and How They Learn It: The 1996 New Hampshire Republican Primary as a Case Study," in W.G. Mayer (ed.), *In Pursuit of the White House 2000* (New York: Chatham, 2000).

[5] S.J. Best and C. Hubbard, "The Role of Televised Debates in the Presidential Nominating Process," in W.G. Mayer (ed.), *In Pursuit of the White House 2000* (New York: Chatham, 2000).