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TO: Clients and Friends  
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RE: Polling in Biracial Elections  
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The results of last week's New York mayoral election again demonstrated that late polls in biracial general elections overstate the black candidate's vote-getting ability. I have now evaluated poll accuracy in 10 such contests since 1982. Every time a black Democrat faces a white Republican in a two-way race, the black candidate does not do as well on election day as final pre-election poll results seem to suggest.

Louis Harris & Associates surveyed New York City voters for The Daily News and WNBC-TV through Monday, November 1, the day before the election. That final poll showed Mayor David Dinkins and GOP challenger Rudolph Giuliani tied, 47% to 47%, prior to any allocation of the undecided vote. Interpreted in the context of previous biracial elections, those figures pointed toward a victory by the white Republican -- albeit by close margin. Giuliani became the first Republican elected NYC mayor since John Lindsay by capturing 51% of the vote to Dinkins's 48%.

There were two other late polls. One conducted by LH Research for cable outlet New York 1 showed a slight Dinkins lead of 48% to 45%. The second, conducted by Penn and Schoen Associates poll for the New York Post and WYNY-TV had the race deadlocked 44% to 44%.

Three other polls reported by the media in the last two weeks showed Dinkins with a lead ranging from 4 to 9 percentage points. Only one major media poll reported a Giuliani lead before any allocation of the undecided.\* That poll's sample, however, was reported to be only 21% black, significantly below the 28% figure estimated by the VRS exit poll of actual voters. Such a sampling difference might in itself explain the more favorable numbers for Giuliani, given the degree to which the vote was racially polarized.

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\*The final Daily News/WNBC-TV/Harris poll reported a 1-point Giuliani lead after allocating the undecided vote between the candidates on a proportional basis.

## No Polling Controversy This Time

There was no controversy about the polls' performance in the New York mayoral race this year for several reasons:

- 1) A Healthy Skepticism about Polls After the 1989 Election-Night Surprise. Journalists did not forget that Dinkins won by a razor-thin margin the last time despite double-digit leads in the final pre-election polls. Thus, they were less likely to uncritically accept any set of poll results as reality.
- 2) Recognition of Polling Problems Specific to Biracial Elections. As early as June, The New York Times made reference to my study of polls in biracial elections in its coverage of the mayoral campaign. During the fall campaign, when the results of the New York Times/CBS poll were reported, readers were cautioned that Dinkins's lead in the poll may be overstated, based on analysis of surveys in similar elections. In fact, when The Times reported on the final NYT/CBS poll, Dinkins's six-point advantage was downplayed. Instead, a headline noted that the mayor's support was below the critical 50% level. Both The Times and The Daily News ran sidebar stories on about my study of biracial elections on October 26, as the campaign entered its final week, although The News oversimplified the polling problem as a case of respondents lying to interviewers. (see attached)
- 3) More Attention to Sampling Error and Other Limitations of Pre-Election Polls. In many late polls, the Mayor's lead was not large enough to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, the industry standard. The Times pointed out that Dinkins's six-point edge in the final NYT/CBS poll fell within the margin of sampling error. The role of turnout in determining the election outcome was also highlighted in poll analysis. When The Daily News reported a nine-point Dinkins lead among registered voters with a week to go, the paper cautioned that the Mayor's lead decreased to one point among those "certain" to vote. The size of turnout was identified as a key to the election outcome.
- 4) Polling in the Final Days Reduced the Number of Undecided Voters. Those organizations that continued polling in the final week reported a trend toward Giuliani, and fewer undecided voters. Fewer undecideds meant less potential for polling problems.

## The Record: Poll Performance in Biracial Elections

The following four tables update those included in a paper I first presented at the 1990 conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Table 1 details the elections and polls studied. The ten contests now include major statewide and local elections in the Northeast, Midwest, South and West. Only polls conducted by independent survey organizations for the news media were selected for analysis. If more than one poll was available for an election, selection was based primarily on the proximity of interviewing to the election. Size of the sample and the overall quality of the methodology were also considerations.

Table 2 illustrates the consistency with which these polls overstate the black candidate's standing, as measured by the point spread. The difference between poll results and election results in the 1993 New York mayoral election was less than the 8 to 12 point difference seen in seven of the nine other cases. In the final Harris Poll, however the undecided vote was reduced to 3% of the likely electorate. Nonetheless, the "undecided factor" again seemed to work to the advantage of the white candidate, in this case Giuliani.

Table 3 illustrates the phenomenon sometimes called "what you see is what you get." In biracial general elections, the black candidate's share of the vote is usually no more than one percentage point higher than his or her support level in the final poll -- before any attempt is made to allocate undecided voters. Only black candidates who broke the 50% level in the final poll were victorious. Mayor Dinkins fell short with 47% in last week's election.

Why do polls in these kinds of elections so consistently overstate the black candidate's standing? This seems to occur because biracial general elections create a conflict between party and race for a large segment of the electorate. Voters who express no candidate preference in polling taken immediately before a biracial general election tend to be predominately white and inclined to favor the Democratic Party. When asked to support either a Republican or a Democrat of a different race, these voters tend to tell pollsters they are undecided. Yet it would appear that they vote solidly for the white Republican on election day. Some of those in the undecided category were probably genuinely uncertain about how they would vote; others may have been reluctant to say they were leaning toward the white Republican, so as not to appear racially prejudiced.

Table 4 shows the application of a suggested method to improve the accuracy of pre-election polls in biracial elections. By assigning all the black undecided vote to the black candidate and all the remaining undecided vote to the white candidate, more accurate estimates of the vote are obtained. In New York, this adjustment produces figures of Giuliani 51%, Dinkins 47% -- almost identical to Giuliani's actual margin of victory (51% vs. 48%).

TABLE 1

<b>THE RACES</b> <b>Biracial General Elections</b>					
<u>Election</u>	<u>Black Democrat</u>	<u>White Republican</u>	<u>Election</u>	<u>Poll Dates</u>	<u>Sample Size/ Organization</u>
NYC-Mayor '93	Dinkins	Giuliani	Nov. 2	Oct. 29-Nov. 1	977 (LV's) Harris
NC-Sen. '90	Gantt	Helms	Nov. 6	Oct. 28-Nov. 1	703 (LV's) KPC Research
VA-Gov. '89	Wilder	Coleman	Nov. 7	Oct. 31-Nov. 1	1274 (RV's) Wash. Post
NYC-Mayor '89	Dinkins	Giuliani	Nov. 7	Nov. 3-5	2258 (LV's) Gallup
Phila.-Mayor '87	Goode	Rizzo	Nov. 3	Oct. 28-29	NA KYW-TV
Chi.-Mayor '87	Washington	Vrdolyak (Ind.)	April 7	March 16-23	923 (LV's) Gallup
CA-Gov. '86	Bradley	Deukmejian	Nov. 2	Oct. 27-30	701 (RV's) Field Inst.
Phila.-Mayor '83	Goode	Egan	Nov. 7	Oct. 21-26	NA Daily News
Chi.-Mayor '83	Washington	Epton	April 12	March 26-30	1007 (RV's) Gallup
CA-Gov. '82	Bradley	Deukmejian	Nov. 2	Oct. 29-31	942 (LV's) Field Inst.

LV's -- Likely Voters

RV's -- Registered Voters

Ind. -- Independent

TABLE 2

**CHANGE IN SUPPORT**  
**Biracial General Elections**

Black Democrat vs. White Non-Democrat

<u>Election</u>	<u>Candidates</u>	<u>Final Poll</u>	<u>Actual Vote</u>	<u>Change</u>	<u>Candidate Lead Poll</u>	<u>Actual Margin</u>	<u>Change</u>
NYC- Mayor '93	Dinkins (D-I)	47	48	+1	0	-3	-3
	Giuliani (R)	47	51	+4			
NC-Sen. '90	Gantt (D)	47	48	-1	+6	-4	-10
	Helms (R-I)	41	52	+11			
VA-Gov. '89	Wilder (D)	52	50.1	-2	+9	0	-9
	Coleman (R)	41	49.9	+9			
NYC-Mayor '89	Dinkins (D)	51	50	-1	+14	+2	-12
	Giuliani (R)	37	48	+11			
Phila.-Mayor '87	Goode (D-I)	50	51	+1	+11	+2	-9
	Rizzo (R)	39	49	+10			
Chi.-Mayor '87	Washington (D-I)	53	54	+1	+14	+8	-6
	Other candidates	39	46	+7			
CA-Gov. '86	Bradley (D)	37	37	0	-19	-24	-5
	Deukmejian (R-I)	56	61	+5			
Phila.-Mayor '83	Goode (D)	50	55	+5	+30	+18	-12
	Egan (R)	20	37	+17			
Chi.-Mayor '83	Washington (D)	51	52	+2	+14	+4	-10
	Epton (R)	37	48	+11			
CA-Gov. '82	Bradley (D)	49	48	-1	+7	-1	-8
	Deukmejian (R)	42	49	+7			

Candidate labels:

D (Democrat); R (Republican); I (Incumbent)

TABLE 3

<b>CHANGE IN SUPPORT Biracial General Elections</b>				
<u>Election</u>	<u>Black Candidate Support in Final Poll</u>	<u>Black Candidate Share of Actual Vote</u>	<u>Difference</u>	<u>Size of Undecided</u>
NYC- Mayor '93	47	48	+1	3
NC-Sen. '90	47	48	+1	12
VA-Gov. '89	52	50	-2	7
NYC-Mayor '89	51	50	-1	10
Phila.-Mayor '87	50	51	+1	11
Chi.-Mayor '87	53	54	+1	8
CA-Gov. '86	37	37	0	5
Phila.-Mayor '83	50	55	+5	21
Chi.-Mayor '83	51	52	+1	12
CA-Gov. '82	49	48	-1	9

TABLE 4

ALLOCATING UNDECIDED BASED ON RACE Biracial General Elections			
	<u>Final Poll</u>	<u>Undecided Allocated</u>	<u>Actual Vote</u>
NYC-Mayor '93			
Dinkins	47	47	48
Giuliani	47	51	51
Other	3	3	1
Undecided	3	-	-
NC-Senate '90 (LV's)			
Gantt	47	49	48
helms	41	51	52
Undecided	12	--	--
NYC-Mayor '89 (RV's)			
Dinkins	51	53	50
Giuliani	36	45	48
Other	2	2	2
Undecided	11	-	-
Chi.-Mayor '87 (RV's)			
Washington	50	52	53
Other Candidates	41	48	46
Undecided	9	-	-
CA-Governor '86 (RV's)			
Bradley	37	38	37
Deukmejian	56	60	61
Other	2	2	2
Undecided	5	-	-
Chi.-Mayor '83 (RV's)			
Washington	51	54	52
Epton	37	46	48
Undecided	12	-	-
CA-Governor '82 (RV's)			
Bradley	50	51	48
Deukmejian	40	48	49
Other	1	1	3
Undecided	9	-	-
Chi.-Mayor '89 (RV's)			
Daley (D)	51	57	55
Evans (I)	30	37	41
Vrdolyak (R)	6	6	4
Undecided	13	-	-

Because racial breakdowns were not available based on likely voters, the figures for all races except the 1993 NYC mayoral race and the 1990 Senate race in North Carolina are based on registered voters.