

DISCREPANCIES IN PAST PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

By

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Past research on retrospective voting reports consistently demonstrates two major response effects:

1. Voting is significantly overreported (Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Adamany and Dubois, 1975; Rogers, 1976; Sigelman, 1982; King, 1981; Cahalan, 1968-69; Clausen, 1968-69; Weiss, 1968-69; Traugott and Katosh, 1979; U.S. Bureau of Census, 1981; and Katosh and Traugott, 1981);
2. The percent voting for the winner is significantly overreported (Key, 1966; King, 1981; Mueller, 1973; Weir, 1975; Himmelweit, et al., 1978; Clausen, 1968-69; Traugott and Katosh, 1979; and Katosh and Traugott, 1981); and
  - a. overreporting of the winner increases with time (Mueller, 1973; Key, 1966; and Weir, 1975).

This paper examines retrospective voting reports from the 1972-1982 General Social Surveys to see if these generalizations are supported by GSS data on voting in the 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 presidential elections. It also compares results with the American national election studies of the University of Michigan and other surveys to see if GSS, Michigan, and other results are comparable.

### Voting

Table 1 shows that reported voting on the GSS is substantially higher (about 10 percentage points) than the estimates based on the election returns. Estimates from the Current Population Survey are lower (3-7 percentage points) than the GSS while estimates from the Michigan election studies are higher (about 5 percentage points). Two reasons are generally credited for the lower and more accurate estimates of the CPS. First, the CPS covers virtually all of the sample population, thereby reducing or eliminating nonresponse bias. Since nonvoters are probably more common among the hard to interview (e.g., ill, traveling, and possibly less willing to be interviewed), the higher response rate of the CPS (96 percent vs. 75 percent on the GSS)

probably increases the nonvoting percentage. Second, the CPS uses informants to supply information about all household members. This probably reduces the percent voting by lessening the social desirability bias that prompts individuals to overreport their own voting. (But see U.S. Census, 1981.) An informant (usually a spouse) presumably is under less pressure to exaggerate the voting of another household member. Also, the informant has less certain information than individuals themselves. This increases item nonresponse and probably lower reliability. It may also have a net impact of underreporting. While both false positives and false negatives would appear, informants are probably more likely than individual respondents to forget that a family members voted (i.e. that memory loss would be greater).

On the other hand several reasons have been suggested for the higher voting percentages disclosed by the Michigan election studies. First, the panel design of the Michigan election studies has been credited for the higher reported votes. Panel mortality between the pre-election survey and the post-election survey appears to modestly increase nonresponse bias. (Clausen, 1968-69 and Traugott and Katosh, 1979). Second, a stimulation hypothesis suggests that participation in the pre-election interview actually encourages respondents to vote (Clausen, 1968-69; Traugott and Katosh, 1979; Yalch, 1976; and Kraut and McConahay, 1973). This notion is supported by the fact that even the validated vote on Michigan election studies is above estimates from the election returns (e.g. in 1976 the validated vote of 60.8 percent was still above the adjusted election return figure of 56.2 percent). In addition, the heavily political content of the Michigan studies may encourage overreporting either by "over-stimulating" recall to increase false positives or by increasing social desirability bias by emphasizing the importance of political activity. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that when pre-

election estimates of votes for the previous presidential election four years earlier are compared to GSS results over a similar span the Michigan results are still slightly higher than the GSS (1-4 percent for the 1968, 1972, and 1976 elections).<sup>1</sup> In sum, all post-election surveys appear to overestimate presidential vote. The single largest factors is probably overreporting due to social desirability bias. Various design features of the CPS (use of informants and a high response rate) apparently lead to closer estimates of the election returns. Similarly the high political content and panel design of the election studies apparently lead to greater overreporting. The GSS falls roughly between the CPS and Michigan estimates. With a response rate closer to the Michigan level and by using individuals rather than informants it gets a higher level than the CPS, but without a panel design and high political content it counts less voters than Michigan.

#### Presidential Voting

Table 2 provides mixed support for the generalization that a bandwagon effect exaggerates the victory margin of the winner. After the 1968 election Nixon averages 3.0 percent points better than his actual electoral showing, but after the 1972 election Nixon's vote averaged 1.3 percentage points lower than his actual vote. It is probable that the Watergate scandal removed the positive valence and negated the name recognition that usually contributes to overreporting of presidents. This interpretation receives support from the figures on voting preference among nonvoters. In 1973 before the Watergate

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<sup>1</sup>A seasonal effect might be an alternative explanation. Since the pre-election survey is held near the climax of a presidential election campaign this may either increase false positives or heighten social desirability bias. The GSS is held in March either at the beginning of the campaign season or in off-election years.

scandal began to seep out nonvoter preference closely parallels the actual vote. In 1974-75 after the disclosures destroyed Nixon's credibility and eventually drove him from office, Nixon loses to McGovern among nonvoters. In 1977 Nixon makes a partial comeback, but still falls far short of his actual vote.<sup>2</sup> The reported votes after the 1976 election show an average Carter overreport of 5.9 percent. This margin tended to increase overtime from an overreport of 4.8 percent in 1977, to 2.8 percent in 1978, 7.3 percent in 1980, and 9.4 percent in 1982. This election most closely follows the pattern described in earlier research (e.g. Mueller, 1973). The recall of the 1980 votes reveals a completely unexpected and anomalous pattern with Reagan's vote underreported by 4.7 percent and Carter actually winning the election! Before examining in some detail this discrepancy we will consider how the GSS and election surveys compared for the 1968, 1972, and 1976 elections.

Table 3 compared GSS and Michigan election recall of votes over approximately the same time span. Both surveys deviate about equally from the actual election returns. The average absolute difference between the election returns and GSS and Michigan were respectively 3.3 percent and 3.1 percent while the average net difference (allowing differences in opposite direction to cancel out) were 2.1 percent for the GSS and 3.3 percent for Michigan. The GSS always estimates the Democratic percentage as higher than Michigan, averaging 4.2 percent. When the Democratic candidate wins, this leads the GSS to show a larger bandwagon effect than Michigan, while when the Republican candidate is victorious, Michigan shows greater overreporting. A previous

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<sup>2</sup>Three factors have been mentioned as regulating the size of the bandwagon effect: 1) the size of the difference between the winner's vote and the normal vote--the larger the margin the larger the bandwagon effect; 2) the survivorship of the president--dead presidents get more votes, and 3) party affiliation--Democrats get more of a bandwagon effect than Republicans. This is believed to be because unvalidated voters tend to be Democratic.

explanation for this difference (Smith, 1978-79) credited the difference to the practice of the GSS always placing the Democratic candidate first on the vote question. The Michigan surveys on the other hand do not name the candidates in the immediate post-election surveys and have placed the Republican first in recalls of the previous election. While small to moderate order effects have been demonstrated on ballots with large numbers of names or low voter interest (Mueller, 1970 and Brook and Upton, 1974), ballot order effects have not been found for presidential candidates (Mueller, 1969). An order effect on recall of presidential vote may be more plausible than on the ballot itself, but no effect has been empirically demonstrated and the differences between the GSS and Michigan appear as large when involving maximum order differences (Democratic first vs. Republican first) as when less differences occurred (Democratic first vs. no mentions of candidates).

No other circumstances clearly explain the difference however. The higher vote reported by Michigan (due to stimulating voting or increased social desirability) is usually assumed to increase the vote or reported vote of less politically involved and more Democratic voters. Even if these voters were more likely to follow a bandwagon, this would dampen the vote for the Democratic candidate only when Republicans won. The GSS, however, also records higher Democratic votes after Carter's 1976 victory. In sum, over the elections from 1968 to 1976 (and possibly in the 1980 election as well), the GSS and Michigan surveys have both tended to show bandwagon effects. They have deviated from the actual election returns to about the same magnitude, but the GSS consistently shows more Democratic votes than Michigan does. Candidate order is a possible, but unproven explanation for this small, but consistent discrepancy. Other explanations involving intrinsic house effects such as interviewer bias, sampling difference, or the like are conceivable, but unexaminable.

### The 1980 Election

Of course, the most surprising figure in Table 2 is Carter's reported victory in 1980. The presidential vote significantly deviates from the actual election returns and other survey results.<sup>3</sup> We considered various artifacts that might explain Reagan's unprecedented underreport: 1) nonresponse among men, 2) overreporting among blacks, 3) a Democratic overcount, 4) vote exaggeration, and 5) presidential unpopularity. First, we noted that men (as usual) were undercounted on the GSS (Smith, 1979). Since women voted for Carter more than men did, this undercounted Reagan's vote by 0.3 percent. Secondly, blacks exaggerate their voting significantly more than whites (Traugott and Katosh, 1979; Katosh and Traugott, 1981 and Rogers, 1976) and overwhelmingly voted for Carter. This depressed Reagan's vote by an estimated 0.8 percent. Next, we looked to see if there was an oversampling of Democrats. In 1982 there were more Democrats than in the 1980 GSS (+2.6 percent). This was not significantly different from the 1980 Michigan election estimate (+1.4 percent) and no significantly higher than the 1982 GSS if clustering is accounted for ( $\chi^2=15.1$ , 7 df, prop.=.036-SRS). However, if we assume that there has been no increase in the proportion Democratic this would mean an undercount for Reagan of (1.5 percent).<sup>4</sup> Fourth, we adjusted

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<sup>3</sup>The Michigan post-election survey (11/80) reported Reagan 50.8 percent, Carter 39.4 percent, other 9.8 percent; AIP01165 (Dec., 1980) has Reagan 50.2 percent, Carter 40.9 percent, Other 8.9 percent; and ABC/Washington Post (11/82) found Reagan 53 percent, Carter 38 percent, Other 8 percent, DK/Not sure 1 percent. Harris results appear below. The proportion for Reagan differs from the election returns at  $<.02$  even after clustering is adjusted for.

<sup>4</sup>Polls tended to show a slight Republican gain after the election with levels subsiding to pre-election levels later on. Complete, up-to-date information is not currently available, however. Gallup, April 25, 1982; "Moments of Partisan Change," 1981; "Realignment Prospects," 1982; Harris, January 14, 1982; Gallup, March 8, 1981; and Gallup, June 18, 1981.



for vote exaggeration by assuming that (1) actually 54 percent of the voting age population had voted and (2) that "excess" voters had the same vote distribution as admitted nonvoters.<sup>5</sup> This accounted for a Reagan undercount of 2.3 percent. Finally, we considered whether low presidential popularity might account for Reagan's undercount. Reagan's popularity at the time of the 1982 GSS survey was almost exactly at the level Carter showed at a comparable time after the 1976 election. Given that even Nixon's unpopularity resulted in only the suppression of a bandwagon effect and no significant underreport and that Carter was able to attract a bandwagon effect with a comparable popularity rating, it would not appear that low popularity can be credited as a major factor.

However data supplied by Louis Harris (Table 4) suggests that reports of past presidential vote varies significantly across time, perhaps in response to current presidential popularity. In particular the Harris data, while consistently showing a wide Reagan margin of victory (10-26 percentage points over Carter), shows a significant dip in Reagan's vote in March-April, 1982 during the GSS field period. While still substantially different from the 1982 GSS results, the Harris readings suggest that the 1982 GSS was fielded during a trough in reports of past votes for Reagan.

In sum, each of the explanations for a Reagan undercount that we were able to evaluate suggest a small undercount of Reagan's vote. None, however, can explain the entire shortfall of 4.7 percent. Cumulatively they come close to bridging the gap, but we really cannot assume that each has an independent,

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<sup>5</sup>Clausen (1968-69) found little difference in the presidential choice of validated voters and unvalidated voters in the 1968 election, but Traugott and Katosh (1979) found that unvalidated voters were almost 2 to 1 for Carter. Among reported voters Carter won by 51.5 percent, but among validated voters Carter lost 48.8 percent to 51.2 percent for Ford.

additive impact. Nor, since many of the explanations should also apply to other elections, can we explain why Reagan's vote is off more than that of other candidates in the past. We are left with the likelihood that a combination of factors led to Carter's "victory" in 1980: 1) a random oversample of Carter voters, 2) various response biases involving voter exaggeration, etc., and 3) a sample point at a possible trough in recall for Reagan.<sup>6</sup>

Using d-system models (Davis, 1975) we tested to see if there was an interaction between house (1980 Michigan post election study and the 1982 GSS), various intervening variables, and presidential vote. No significant interaction was found for race, education, region, party identification, presidential vote in 1976, sex, or religion. Age had an interaction of marginal significance ( $\chi^2=6.1$ , 2df, prob.=.045-SRS). Michigan showed Carter support lowest among the young while GSS shows Reagan support lowest among the young. The association between age and vote on the Gallup post-election survey is closer to GSS than Michigan (Gallup, Dec., 1981). A comparison with election returns by region does show Reagan's vote slightly overreported in the Northeast and West while underreported the most in the South (-9.9 percent) and Midwest (-8.5 percent). With the possible exception of region we find that the differences between the 1982 GSS and Michigan and other reports occur only on the marginals.

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<sup>6</sup>Another possible explanation is nonresponse bias. Conceivably Reagan voters were more likely to refuse to participate in the GSS. This nonresponse bias does not appear to be occurring on other surveys, however, and no such bias is indicated by research on nonresponse bias on the 1980 GSS (Smith, forthcoming). When data on nonrespondents to the 1982 GSS becomes available later this year, this explanation will be directly examined.

### Conclusion

The GSS data on the 1968-1980 presidential elections confirm that overreporting is a consistent and enduring feature of retrospective voting questions. The magnitude of the overreport varies according to various design features of the surveys involved but averages about 5 percent for the CPS, 10 percent for the GSSs, and 15 percent for the Michigan election studies. Bandwagon effects appear for the 1968 and 1976 elections, with the 1972 election showing no inflation in Nixon's vote. This pattern apparently deviates from the norm because of the extraordinary negative attitudes created by Watergate. The analysis also found that the 1982 GSS report of voting significantly diverged from the actual election returns, the reported vote of other houses, and from expectations based on the bandwagon effect. Associations with independent variables are not distorted by the discrepancies in marginals, however. Sampling error coupled with response effects and a short term dip in public reports of votes for Reagan seems to provide the best explanations for the anomaly.

In general, it appears that past vote and candidate voted for are very difficult to accurately measure. The main biases are fairly well understood, however, and stable. When differences in the biases do occur between houses (e.g. percent voting on the CPSs and Michigan studies) or across time (e.g. 1972 election returns versus other elections), the reasons are usually explicable. Thus while the overreporting and bandwagon biases seriously distort population parameters, these errors are understandable and reproducible. In addition they shed light about human behavior, providing one of our most important series on the operation of social desirability effects and the difficulties of recall in general (Mueller, 1973). Now that we know the nature and magnitude of the biases in recall of past presidential votes,

we should be able to use these findings to formulate and test hypotheses about human memory, social desirability, and other social, psychological, cognitive, and political interactions.

TABLE 1  
 REPORTED VOTE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, 1968-1980

Year	Actual Vote			Reported Vote		
				Current Population Survey	General Social Survey	Michigan Election Survey
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
1968	60.9 <sup>a</sup>	62.8 <sup>b</sup>	65.8 <sup>c</sup>	67.8 <sup>b</sup>	70.9 <sup>b,d</sup>	75.6 <sup>b,e</sup>
1972	55.5	57.1	--	63.0	67.3	72.3
1976	54.3	55.7	56.2	59.2	65.2	71.6
1980	53.2	55.1	--	59.2	66.2	70.7

<sup>a</sup>Resident population voting age, includes aliens, stateside armed forces, and institutionalized population.

<sup>b</sup>Civilian, noninstitutionalized population of voting age, includes aliens.

<sup>c</sup>Eligible citizens of voting age, figures adjusted by Clausen, 1968-69 and Traugott and Katosh, 1979.

<sup>d</sup>Combined General Social Surveys.

<sup>e</sup>Immediate post-election surveys.

SOURCES: Actual vote--Scammon and McGilivray, 1981; CPS-U.S. Bureau of Census, 1982; GSS and Michigan-calculated from data files.

TABLE 2a  
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN THE 1968 ELECTION,  
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1972-1973

	1972	1973	All	Election Returns
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Voted	73.0 (1454) <sup>a</sup>	68.5 (1357)	70.9 (2811)	
Voted for				
Humphrey	42.5	39.8	41.2	42.7
Nixon	47.4	45.3	46.4	43.4
Other	10.1 (1009)	14.9 ( 899)	12.4 (1908)	13.9
Voting Preference Nonvoters <sup>b</sup>				
Humphrey	38.8	37.4	38.1	
Nixon	41.1	39.3	40.2	
Other	20.2 ( 258)	23.3 ( 270)	21.8 ( 528)	

TABLE 2b  
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN THE 1972 ELECTION,  
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1973-1977

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	All	Election Returns
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Voted	69.4 (1496) <sup>a</sup>	69.0 (1453)	66.2 (1409)	67.3 (1397)	64.6 (1397)	67.3 (4880)	
Voted for							
McGovern	39.8	38.8	35.6	37.4	37.3	37.8	37.5
Nixon	58.4	57.4	61.4	59.1	61.2	59.4	60.7
Other	1.8	3.8 ← (1015)	3.0 — ( 975)	3.5 — ( 922)	1.6 — ( 920)	2.7 — ( 883)	1.8 — (4715)
Voting Preference Nonvoters <sup>b</sup>							
McGovern	31.6	43.2	48.9	43.1	42.7	41.7	
Nixon	57.8	38.6	41.7	41.1	50.1	46.2	
Other	10.6 ( 377)	18.3 ( 345)	9.3 ( 333)	15.8 ( 336)	7.1 ( 351)	12.2 (1742)	

TABLE 2c

PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN THE 1976 ELECTION,  
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1977-1982

	1977	1978	1980	1982	All	Election Returns
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Voted	64.4 (1521) <sup>a</sup>	65.3 (1489)	64.9 (1374)	66.1 (1352)	65.3 (3746)	
Voted for						
Carter	54.9	52.9	57.4	59.5	56.0	50.1
Ford	44.2	45.5	41.6	40.0	42.9	48.0
Other	0.9 ( 962)	1.6 ( 940)	1.0 ( 863)	0.6 ( 861)	1.0 (3626)	1.9
Voting Preference Nonvoters <sup>b</sup>						
Carter	65.2	58.3	53.9	52.0	57.8	
Ford	32.2	36.7	39.4	42.7	37.4	
Other	2.6 ( 463)	5.0 ( 422)	6.7 ( 388)	5.3 ( 358)	4.8 (1631)	

TABLE 2d

PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN THE 1980 ELECTION,  
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY, 1982

	1982	Election Returns
	Percent	Percent
Voted	66.2 (1469) <sup>a</sup>	
Voted for		
Carter	46.5	41.0
Reagan	46.1	50.8
Other	7.4 ( 948)	8.2
Voting Preference		
Nonvoters <sup>b</sup>		
Carter	47.5	
Reagan	45.8	
Other	16.7 ( 473)	

<sup>a</sup>Voters + nonvoters do not total the number who voted because of respondents who refused to disclose their vote, did not remember their vote, or failed to answer the subquestion.

<sup>b</sup>Respondents who were not of voting age at the time of election are excluded from the base of the calculation of the percent voting and from the nonvoter category as well.



TABLE 3

A COMPARISON OF PRESIDENTIAL VOTE FROM THE MICHIGAN ELECTION STUDIES AND THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1968-1980

Election year	Studies							
	GSS72	ELEC72	GSS73	GSS76	ELEC76	GSS77	GSS80	ELEC80
1968 - Percent Nixon	47.4	50.9	46.0					
1972 - Percent Nixon	--	58.4	63.9	59.1	63.3	61.2		
1976 - Percent Carter	--	--	--	--	50.2	54.9	57.4	53.2

TABLE 4  
HARRIS DATA ON PAST PRESIDENTIAL VOTE, 1981-1982

Survey	Dates	Vote (Percent)				
		Reagan	Carter	Other	Not Sure	Reagan (Not Sure Excluded)
812101	1/81	55	32	10	3	56.7
812102	1/81	55	32	9	3	56.7
812103	2/81	53	34	10	3	54.6
812104	3/81	53	34	9	4	55.2
812105	3/81	56	30	8	6	59.6
812107	4/81	56	31	8	5	58.9
812106	5/81	55	30	10	5	57.9
812108	6/81	50	33	12	5	52.6
812109	7/81	51	35	8	5	53.7
812110	8/81	53	34	7	6	56.4
812111	9/81	55	33	8	4	57.3
812113	12/81	52	33	9	6	55.3
822101	1/81	56	31	10	3	57.7
822102	1/81	54	34	8	4	56.3
822103	2/82	53	34	9	4	55.2
822010	3/82	51	34	9	6	54.3
822104	3/82	49	36	10	5	51.6
822105	4/82	48	38	11	3	49.5
822012	4/82	51	32	11	6	54.3
822106	5/82	50	35	10	5	52.6
822014	6/82	52	32	9	7	55.9
822107	6/82	53	35	7	5	55.8
822033	6-7/82	47	31	9	13	54.0
822109	7/82	49	33	12	6	52.1

SOURCE: Provided by Louis Harris

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

	Model	$\chi^2$	df	Prob.	decision
1) Proportion Reagan, Not Sure Included	prop.=constant	61.0	23	.001	reject
1) Proportion Reagan, Not Sure Excluded	prop.=constant	48.6	23	.002	reject

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