The Elway Poll

7107 GREENWOOD N SEATTLE WA 98103
206/264-1500 FAX/264-0301

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TO: Subscribers

FROM: Stuart Elway

RE: Governor's Race Polls

Recent polling in the Governor's race indicates that the race is once again "tight as a tick". Or not. Of the six polls published on this race in the last month (!), five of them show the race to be within 5 percentage points. The Elway Poll is the outlier, showing a 16 point Gregoire lead.

This understandably has led to speculation that "*The Elway Poll* may be wrong," which is accurate. It may be wrong.

Of course that same statement can also be made about every survey that has ever been conducted. Every survey has error. Some potential sources of error are inter-related. Some are more measurable than others.

Without going *too far* into the weeds, here are some things to consider about the polling in the Governor's race: Who was polled? How were they polled? How were the questions worded? And how were the candidates identified? (the "GOP Party" effect).

First a few of pertinent contextual points:

- Four of the six polls published in the last month were conducted by national polling firms, who are polling in most of the 50 states. The other was conducted by Moore Information for the Rossi campaign.
- In June and July of 2006, these very same national pollsters showed a Cantwell-McGavick "statistical dead heat," which was widely reported. At the same time, The *Elway Poll* showed a 14-point Cantwell advantage in July, 18 points in September and 18 points in October. Cantwell won by 17 points.
- *The Elway Poll* numbers for Gregoire have matched those of the national pollsters within the margin of error. The difference has been in our lower numbers for Rossi and our higher undecided numbers. If our sampling was flawed, we would not be off on only one side of the equation.
- Rossi's numbers actually slipped from 39% to 36% between our June and July Poll. Very unusual.
- *The Elway Poll* had virtually the same results as these other five polls in the McCain-Obama race. Only the Governor race differed. If our sample was off, our presidential results would not have matched their results.

What could explain the current discrepancy between the national pollsters and *The Elway Poll*? Here are some possible contributors.

Who Was Polled?

The national pollsters claim to interview "likely voters." Who is a likely voter and how is that determined?

The Elway Poll samples from the most current list of registered voters each month. The sample is proportional by county. We know they are registered voters before we call them, and we know how frequently they have voted. The best indicator of a "likely voter" is past voting behavior.

The national pollsters use random digit dialing (RDD). This has two important implications. First, this means that their likely voters are "self reported." The recorded voice asks series of screening question to determine whether the person answering the questions is: a) registered to vote and b) likely to vote in the upcoming election. Respondents "exaggerate" both numbers.

About 72% of Washington adults who are to eligible vote are registered. Voter turnout in 2004 was 84%. That makes the likely voting electorate about 60% of adults. But all adults are in the sample frame of a random digit dial sample, meaning that 40% of the people initially dialed an RDD survey will not be likely voters. That requires a lot of screening.

Secondly, because telephone prefixes do not match political boundaries, the geographic coverage of the state is approximate. RDD samples are matched to population, not to registered voters, which are not the same. Allocation of telephone numbers for an RDD sample is based on prefixes in population centers. Often, for example, "Eastern Washington" may be represented by the 3 or 4 largest population centers in the 509 area code. We do not know exactly how the RDD samples are developed.

Our samples are proportional to the number of voters by county. With our voter list sample, we know where the respondent lives down to the address.

Sample Size

Sample size determines the statistical margin of sampling error of a survey. This is almost always reported simply as the "margin of error," implying that sampling is the only source of potential error.

The Elway Poll interviews a smaller sample that the national pollsters. Each sample size has a calculated margin of sampling error. Our typical sample is 400 (±5%). The July Rasmussen poll was 500 (±4.5%), Survey USA polled 666 (±3.8%), Strategic Vision polled 800 (±3.5). The difference between the largest and the smallest of these samples (1.5%) is not large enough to account for the difference in findings.

Interview Mode

Two of the national pollsters (Survey USA and Rasmussen) use Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology for their interviewing. An auto dialer places the call and a recording asks the questions. Respondents use the touch tone key pad to answer the questions. IVR polls have gained in acceptance but are still controversial because there is no way to verify who is really answering the survey questions. As one pollster recently said, "a 16 year old boy can convince a robo-poll that he is a 43-year-old woman."

Our surveys are conducted by live interviewers who ask to speak to the registered voter on the voter list.

The increase in IVR polls acceptance has been largely due to their accuracy over the last several elections, and their increased use by the media.

Question wording

Here there are a two important distinctions in the ways various polls ask the question that could materially effect the outcome.

Not all of the national pollsters reveal their question wording, but most ask a variation of the question: "If the Election for Governor in 2008 was between the Democrat Christine Gregoire and the Republican Dino Rossi, whom would you vote for?" (Strategic Vision).

Here is *The Elway Poll* question, with responses:

> In the race for governor, the candidates will be Christine Gregoire, [greg WAHR] who prefers the Democrat party and Dino Rossi, who prefers the GOP party. As things stand today in the race for governor, are you inclined to…
>
> ROTATE 1>4 4>1
>
> Definitely Vote For Gregoire…43%
> Probably Vote For Gregoire…9%
> Probably Vote For Rossi…14%
> Definitely Vote For Rossi…22%
> [OTHER]…4%
> [DK/NA…8%]

An important difference is that *The Elway Poll* always asks the question in the form of a scale. The national polls typically ask for whom the respondent would vote and then asks those undecided toward which candidate they "lean." We do not ask the respondent to pretend that the election is today and we put the "leaning" opinion into the question, not as a push to undecided or reluctant respondents. This typically results in a larger undecided total in our surveys. (12% in July vs. an average of 6% in the last 3 national polls). The aggregated "definitely" and "probably vote for" totals are what get reported, although they are always displayed separately in our results.

Identification of the Candidates – The "GOP Party"

The Elway Poll identified the candidates as they identify themselves on the ballot, thus, Dino Rossi was listed as "prefers the GOP party." We found in our June survey that 25% of the registered voters – including 18% of Republicans and 27% of Independents – did not know what "GOP" stands for. The question was:

> On the new Primary election ballot, instead of indicating which political party the candidates belong to, each candidate will indicate which party he or she prefers. If the ballot says that a certain candidate prefers the "G.O.P. Party," what party do you think that candidate is associated with? (answers not read)
>
> Republican…75%
> Democrat…7%
> Other…3%
> Don't Know…16%

The potential confusion could have resulted is as much as a 9 point depression of the Rossi total if Republican-inclined voters did not understand that Rossi is a Republican. (18% of the Republicans = 5% of the total. Plus 27% of half of the Independents = 4% of the total).

Each of the potential sources of survey error outlined here makes more a difference in July than in late October. It is relatively easy to predict and election in the last days of the campaign, when voter attention is at its peak and virtually everyone has made up his/her mind. It is more problematic in July when fewer people are paying attention or have decided how they will vote.

And of course, I could be wrong.