

Findings from the DC Election Poll conducted at Eastern Market's Precinct 89 for the 2008
Presidential Election

by

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Abstract

This report documents the results of an exit-poll survey that took place in the Eastern Market neighborhood of Washington, DC during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election. The purpose of this survey was to find out voter's attitudes toward some prevailing ballot issues that may have influenced their choice for president. This report will show that Ward 6 of Precinct 89 reflects the national trends in both presidential choice and why they voted that way.

Intro

On November 4, 2008, the citizens of Washington, DC as well as those in other municipalities and states within the US went to the polls to decide the future of their country by choosing the next President. This was the first time in history in the U.S.'s Presidential election that an African-American held the presidential nomination of a major party as well as having a woman nominated as the vice-presidential candidate to the Republican party. The city of Washington, DC is a prominent center for national and international politics. It is the nation's capital and is also a majority democratic municipality. With such major issues as the ongoing war in Iraq, healthcare costs, the state of the economy and new milestones made with first time political nominations to both major parties, as survey researchers we were interested in finding out the most prominent factors influencing the residents of DC Presidential choice.

The survey took place in Eastern Market located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C. We surveyed voters in Ward 6 at Precinct 89 at Hines Jr. High School. Unlike other areas of Washington, DC, Eastern market has a more diverse population compared to the city's majority Black population. It is also a more affluent area and is located blocks away from the National Mall. Given these factors, as researchers we wanted to know if residents in this area had different concerns regarding their choice for the winning presidential candidate versus the typical demographic of the city, as well as in comparison to those of the overall nation. As first time exit-pollsters, we were interested in finding out what major issues affected voters choice for presidential candidate along with the winning candidate of this precinct.

Exit Polling

The purpose of conducting an exit poll is to find out who the voters voted for in a political election and why they did. The use of a self-administered questionnaire allows pollsters to collect information on voter's political candidate of choice, attitudes towards various issues, along with their demographic characteristics. The results of exit polls enable researchers to make comparisons across these various survey variables in regards to voter's choice for their preferential political candidate winner. This data is collected from voters immediately after they have voted in their precinct and prior to any election results being called. The expedience of the exit poll process right after voting prevents problems of misreporting along with averting the influence of the bandwagon effect by calls of early election results. Additionally, exit pollster keep track of nonrespondents characteristics throughout the survey process in order to assess the affects of nonresponse in survey outcomes.

Historically, exit poll results were not as reliable because of the inconsistencies of early methodological exercises. It wasn't until 1967 that Warren Mitofsky and a colleague designed a systematic methodological system to collect exit poll survey data that would accurately reflect the results of the target population. Prior to this, journalistic predictions were based on "key" or "tag" precincts from earlier elections (Scheuren and Alvey, p. 5, 2007). Since this major contribution by Mitofsky's to the survey research field, his exit poll survey process has gained worldwide recognition due to its ability to make seemingly accurate predictions of election candidate winners. Mitofsky is known as the Father of Exit Polling and his company Edison and Mitofsky continues to be used as the source for early predictions of electoral candidate winners by major news sources.

Pre-Survey, Survey, and Post Survey Stages

Managing a survey can be a very difficult task. There are many stages in the survey process that have to be planned and kept track off. To begin the planning process, we worked with the DC group to develop a Gantt chart in order to manage the start and finish dates of our project tasks. In the planning phase of our survey we created the following fourteen tasks in sequential order: (1) locate station, (2) find regulations, (3) early voting info, (4) demographics for precinct (census), (5) develop questionnaire, (6) pre-test questionnaire, (7) supplies, (8) determining your "n", (9) decide on tactic to approach others, (10) decide responsibilities for each person, (11) collect data, (12) input data, (13) analyze data, (14) prepare and write up

report. These tasks can be divided up into basically three phases of the survey process: (a) pre-survey, (b) survey phase, (c) and post-survey phase. Each of these stages will be described below.

In the pre-survey phase, we decided to choose Eastern market as our polling station because it is the residential area of one of the researchers. In order to complete this task without running into any restrictions or breaking any violations, we first contacted The DC Board of Elections to find out regulations for pollsters. We were informed that pollsters are required to stand at least fifty feet away from the voting area. In addition to this, we also found out when early voting was to take place. We were told by the Elections office that this was taking place at Judiciary Square during business hours between 9-5pm beginning Nov. 21st and that early voters had to have a valid excuse. Since finding out that the conditions to try to pretest our survey during in the early voting period would be challenging, we decided then to pre-test our questionnaire on our co-workers or friends.

In the next phase entitled survey; we both sat down and developed our questionnaire. We took a look at some past surveys used by pollsters by the National Election Poll and also some others online, for example, *whatisasurvey.info*. We decided to create some questions of our own for this particular election along with incorporating some similar questions used in previous elections. Once we created the questionnaire, the next task was the pre-testing stage to determine if our questions and answer categories could be easily understood by the general population. We decided to conduct retrospective and current probing. Retrospective probing is for the purpose of determining the subject's ability to manage a self-completion instrument unaided. Concurrent probing seeks to finding out whether or not the individuals are answering the questions in the same way or are having some difficulties. For our participants, we conducted retrospective probing first and then concurrent.

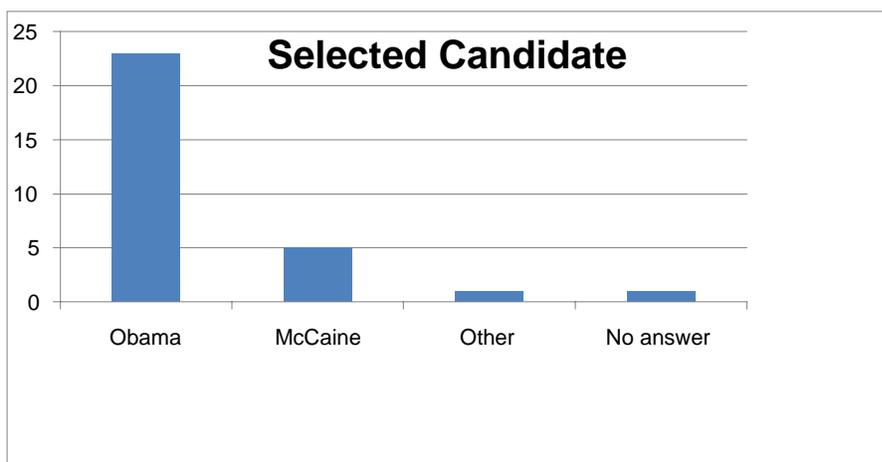
Together we completed six pre-tests on participants that were registered to vote for the 2008 Presidential Election. Participants were between the ages of nineteen and sixty-eight. We interviewed both males and females and had one first time voter. On average it took 3: 25 minutes for participants to complete the retrospective approach and 9:10 minutes to complete the concurrent approach. Overall, all of the participants felt that the questionnaire was easy to understand and easy to complete. We didn't run into any major problems, however a few skipped over the directions and marked more than one answer category for a question. Due to this, we

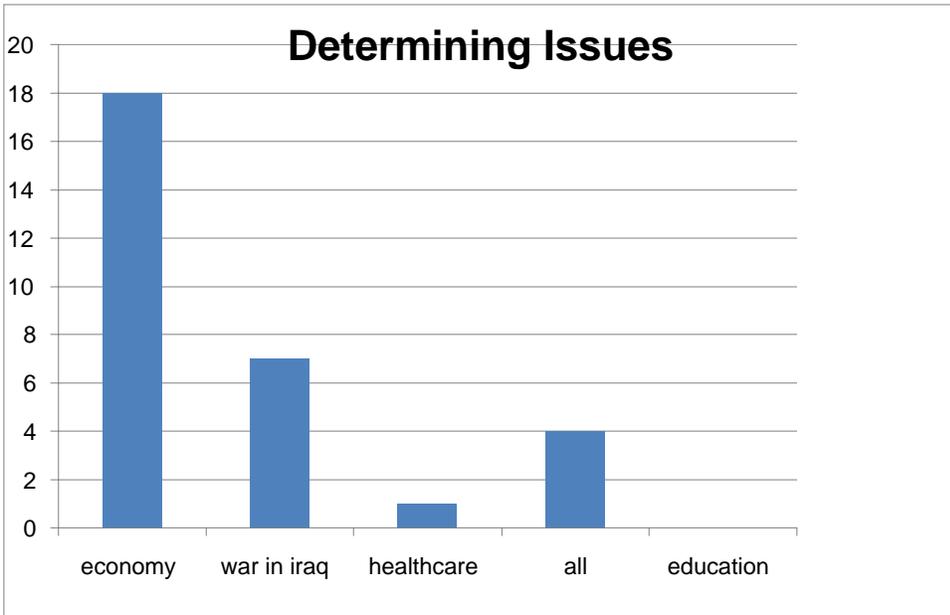
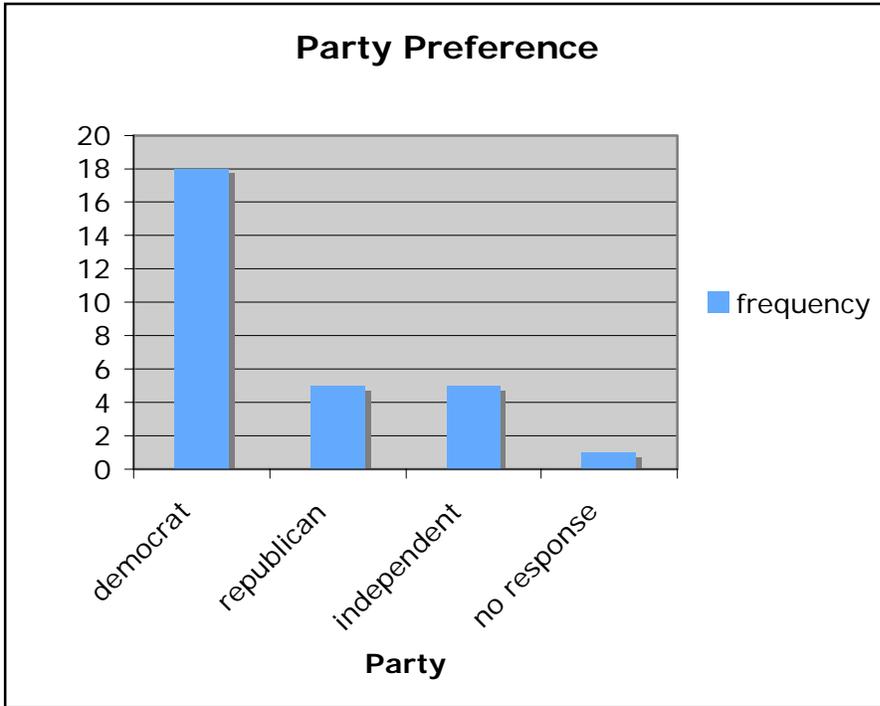
decided to bold and enlarge the directions and change one of our answer categories. The completed questionnaire can be found as a separate appendix.

On the day of the Presidential election, both of us arrived shortly before we were scheduled to conduct our exit poll at 5pm. Prior to setting up, we contacted the managing polling official to see where we could set up. Fortunately, she allowed us to stand inside the precinct near the exit to conduct our interviews. During our set up, we noticed that there was another pollster from the National Election Poll who was conducting interviews. To ensure that we would not be crossing each others paths to conduct interviews, we selected our “n” at 3. This is because we noticed that voter traffic at the polling location was slow and the other pollster had already set her “n” set at 10. After setting up we started our interviewing process exactly at 5pm. The first 15 interviews were conducted by Erin with Muriel recording her observations of respondents and nonrespondent characteristics. Following this, we both switched duties to complete the process and ended at 7pm with a completed count of 30 interviews.

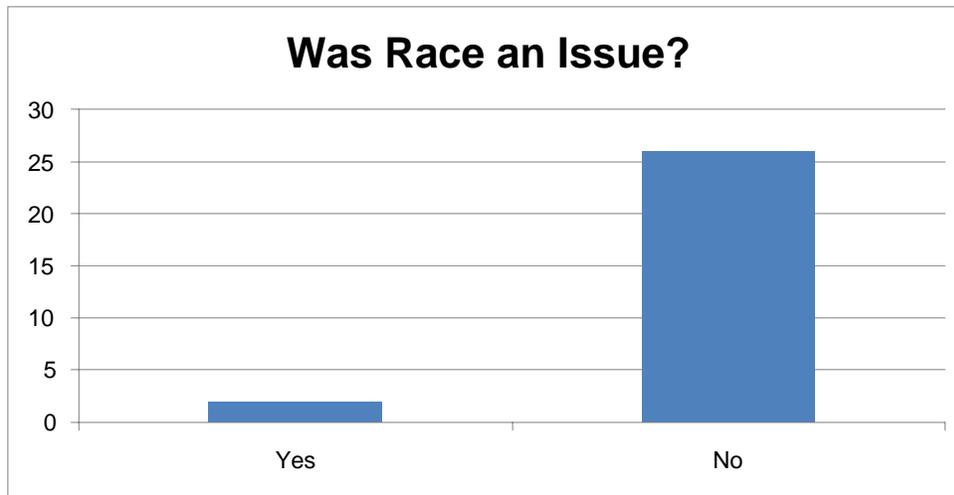
Findings:

The below figure shows that of the 30 respondents to our exit poll, there was overwhelming support for Obama with McCain coming in second. This reflects the actual results from our district. Our findings are similar to the national results with Obama having an overwhelming margin or victory.





The chart above shows that the economy played a very important role in a person's decision on picking their presidential candidate.



We asked if race was an issue, and most people marked that it was not an issue. There were only two people who marked that it was and they were both surprisingly minorities.

Conclusion

On November 4, 2008 we conducted an exit poll and learned so much more than just exit polling. We learned about the process from start to finish of exit polling. We experienced first hand exit polling by actually conducting it. We saw how hard it is to actually keep count and track while doing exit polling and realized how helpful it is to have a partner. We learned that no matter how we write the instructions or explain what we're trying to do, people will ask questions and do things differently. For example, even though we asked that they only mark one answer, some people still marked multiple answers. On a more personal side, we were reminded of how hard it can be to work in teams when people are working on so many different schedules. We also learned hard lessons about meeting deadlines and working as a team. Our results were very much like national results.

We learned a lot on this project and if given more time, I'm sure we would learn even more. It is recommended that both participants work on and review all aspects of the polling process and reporting process.

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