

Alexandria 2008 Exit Poll Report: Douglas MacArthur School (Precinct #205)

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On Election Day 2008, we conducted an exit poll at a precinct in Alexandria, Virginia as part of a class project for our Survey Management Course at George Washington University. This report describes our polling methodology, nonresponse, and results. We also provide some advice for future students or novice exit pollsters who want conduct an exit poll in the future.

1. Description of the precinct

We conducted our exit poll at the Douglas MacArthur School in Alexandria, Virginia (Alexandria precinct number 205). Based on our observations from driving around the precinct, it appeared to be one of the wealthier precincts in Alexandria. We noticed about an equal number of Obama and McCain signs in yards and in car windows. We learned from talking with voters and campaign volunteers at the precinct that it used to be a solidly Republican precinct, but has been trending more Democratic in recent years. In the 2004 Presidential Election, 63 percent of voters in this precinct voted for the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, and 36 percent voted for the Republican candidate, George W. Bush.

2. Polling and voting conditions on Election Day 2008

This section gives a description of the polling conditions (e.g. time of day, weather, locations of exits) and voting conditions (e.g. cooperation of officials, length of voting queues) that we experienced which could have affected execution of our protocol, respondent cooperation, and survey results. We recorded our observations periodically throughout the afternoon (a scanned copy of our observational instrument is provided as Appendix A).

2.1 Time of day and weather conditions

We conducted our poll during the middle of the day. We began conducting the exit poll at about 2:30 p.m. and ended around 4:30 p.m. It rained throughout the afternoon at varying intensities, from a slight drizzle to a steady downpour.

2.2 Polling location exits and distance from exit

Virginia has a 40-foot, no-campaigning rule around all poll entrances. Douglas MacArthur School only had one entrance and one exit, and the exit was at the opposite end of the building from the entrance. The voting took place in the school's gymnasium, and voters exited from the gymnasium directly onto the sidewalk outside. Because the exit was more than 40 feet from the entrance, we were able to stand very close to the door to intercept voters.

2.3 Presence of other groups at the polls

There were no other exit pollsters at our precinct when we were there. There were campaigners for both Obama and McCain, as well as several members of a vote monitoring group. These other groups did not impede us in any way from intercepting voters, and were generally cordial and interested in our project.

2.4 Cooperation of election officials

When we arrived at the polling place, we immediately introduced ourselves to the election officials inside and informed them that we would be conducting an exit poll for a couple of hours. The election officials were very cooperative and did not express any concern about our presence.

2.5 Voter traffic

When we introduced ourselves to the election officials, we noticed that there was no line of voters waiting to vote. This is probably because of the time of day we conducted our poll. By 2:30 p.m., about 83 percent of voters in this precinct had already cast their ballots. When we arrived, the election officials told us that 1,927 people had already voted. A total of 2,323 people in the precinct voted on Election Day.¹ When we concluded our polling at 4:30 p.m., the total number of people who had voted had risen to 2,191; therefore, only 264 voters came to the polls during the two hours we conducted our poll.

3. Polling protocol

The two requirements we had for the exit poll was that we had to have a minimum sample size of 30, and both of us had to act as an interceptor and recorder. This section explains how we handled these two requirements.

3.1 Interceptor and recorder tasks

The interceptor's job was to approach voters as they left the polls and to try to get them to complete the survey. The recorder's job was to record the outcome of each attempt (completed interview, refusal, miss, or not eligible), and also to record the apparent sex, age, and race of the respondent. This information could later be used to analyze and adjust for nonresponse (a scanned copy of our nonresponse instrument is included as Appendix B).

Before Election Day, we had pre-tested our protocol outside the early voter polling precinct in Alexandria on a Saturday in October. During our pre-test, we determined the

¹ Official 2008 Alexandria precinct voting results are available on the Internet at: https://www.voterinfo.sbe.virginia.gov/election/DATA/2008/07261AFC-9ED3-410F-B07D-84D014AB2C6B/Unofficial/00_p_510_89BE12EC-7BBF-479C-935A-9B8C51DD3524.shtml.

ideal way to divide up the interceptor and recorder jobs was to trade jobs after 10 attempts, regardless of the outcome of the attempt. This allowed us to “take a break” from the interceptor role so that we would not become too fatigued. Each interceptor achieved at least 15 completes.

When we approached a potential respondent, we first asked them if they had just voted in order to screen out people who were not included in the population. Examples of nonvoters who left the polling place included poll workers, mail carriers, or people accompanying voters to the polls. If a person indicated they had voted, we explained that we were George Washington University graduate students conducting an exit poll as a class project. If the potential respondent expressed reluctance, we explained it was only a one-page survey and would take about 2 to 3 minutes to complete. While it was raining, we also offered to hold large umbrellas over the respondent so that they would not get wet.

Each of us had two clipboards with our unique questionnaires attached.² After several missed respondents at the beginning of the polling, we decided that having multiple clipboards could significantly reduce the number of misses we had. Respondents filled out the questionnaires themselves and then placed their completed questionnaires in a covered ballot box to maintain respondent confidentiality.

During the first hour of our exit poll, our professor and teaching assistant, Fritz Scheuren and Ali Mustaq, respectively, monitored our protocol to ensure that we were making every attempt to collect high quality data.

3.2 Sampling interval

Because we conducted our poll during the middle of the day when voter traffic was slow, we used a low sampling interval in order to get the required 30 completes in a reasonable amount of time. We used a 1-in-4 sampling ratio throughout the duration of our poll, which allowed us to collect our sample in about two hours. We tried not to deviate from the sampling interval because this can introduce significant interviewer selection bias (Scheuren and Alvey, 2008). If two potential respondents exited the polling place at the same time, the first person who crossed a predetermined crack in the sidewalk was approached.

This interval resulted in very few missed respondents. We experienced most of the misses at the beginning of the poll, but this was mainly due to two large groups of people leaving the polls at the same time and not enough clipboards with surveys for each respondent to complete the survey.

We had one voter approach us and volunteer to complete the survey, even though this individual was not part of the sampling interval. We allowed this individual to complete

² Questionnaires had unique identifier marks on them so that we would later know who the interceptor was. This information was used to analyze nonresponse.

the survey, but put a special mark on the questionnaire so that we could later identify it. This case was not included in the analysis.

4. Nonresponse analysis

This section discusses the nonresponse we received during our exit poll, and also analyzes it by interceptor and respondent demographic characteristics.

4.1 Nonresponse by interceptor

Our overall response rate was 68 percent, and our cooperation rate was 79 percent (see table 1).³ Our response rates were higher than rates usually achieved in exit polls (Merkle and Edelman, 2002). Our cooperation rate was much higher than our response rate because we had several missed respondents at the beginning of our exit poll while we were still getting set up. However, throughout the remainder of the exit poll, each interceptor had two clipboards with questionnaires in case voter traffic leaving the polling place was heavier than normal. We believe having multiple clipboards significantly reduced our misses throughout most of the poll. We also credit our low number of misses (6 in total) with being able to stand close to the exit where almost every voter had to walk right past us to get to the parking lot.

Table 1. Response outcome by interceptor

	Response outcome					Rates	
	Completes	Refusals	Misses	Not eligibles	Total	Response	Cooperation
Total	30	8	6	1	45	0.68	0.79
Jill	15	3	5	1	24	0.65	0.83
Betty	15	5	1	0	21	0.71	0.75

Given the rainy weather, we also had a low number of total refusals (8 in total). We believe that telling voters the survey would only take 2 to 3 minutes helped persuade many people to complete the survey. Also, offering to hold umbrellas over respondents while it was raining also helped to persuade some people.

The response and cooperation rates did not differ significantly between interceptors in an independent t-test (response rate p-value=0.44; cooperation rate p-value=0.89). It is important to compare response rates by interceptor, because interceptor characteristics can influence voters' likelihood of responding to exit polls. Both Jill and Betty are female and in the 18 to 34 age category. Jill is white, and Betty is Asian. Even though Betty is not a native English speaker, this did not appear to affect cooperation rates.

³ The response rate was calculated as: $[\text{Completes} / (\text{Completes} + \text{Refusals} + \text{Misses})]$. Not eligibles were not included in the rate because these are nonvoters who exit the polling place. Since these people did not vote, they are not included in the population of voters. The cooperation rate measures the percent of people who were approached who completed the survey, and is a measure of interviewer's ability to persuade respondents to participate. It is calculated as: $[\text{Completes} / (\text{Completes} + \text{Refusals})]$.

4.2 Nonresponse by voter demographics

4.2.1 Response outcomes

Table 2 below provides a breakdown of response outcomes by voter demographic. Response and cooperation rates across different race categories did not vary greatly. The response rate for voters age 55 and over was about 18 percentage points higher than in younger age categories, but this is mainly due to misses in the younger age categories. Cooperation rates for the different age groups were very similar.

Both response and cooperation rates by sex differed greatly. Women had an almost 20 percentage point higher cooperation rate than did men. However, an independent t-test on these groups revealed that the difference was not significant (p-value=0.12). Overall, we were successful in persuading a demographically diverse group of voters to participate in our exit poll.

Table 2. Response outcome by voter demographic

	Response outcome					Rates	
	Completes	Refusals	Misses	Not eligibles	Total	Response	Cooperation
Sex							
Male	13	6	4	1	24	0.57	0.68
Female	17	2	2	0	21	0.81	0.89
Age							
18-34	7	1	3	0	11	0.64	0.88
35-54	14	5	3	1	23	0.64	0.74
55 and over	9	2	0	0	11	0.82	0.82
Race							
Black	6	1	2	0	9	0.67	0.86
White	21	7	3	1	32	0.68	0.75
Other/ Don't know	3	0	1	0	4	0.75	1.00

Among the voters who refused, 6 were white males, and most were in the older age categories. This is not unexpected, because men are less likely in general to participate in exit polls (Merkle and Edelman, 2002). Since both of us are young, our age may have affected our refusals among older voters. This would not be inconsistent with other exit poll results that showed older voters were less likely to cooperate if the interceptor was young (Merkle and Edelman, 2002; Edison Media Research, 2008).

4.2.1 Accuracy of guessing demographics

The above nonresponse analysis is based on our observations of the voters' sexes, ages, and races. It is entirely possible that our observations were incorrect and that the nonresponse analysis does not reflect the true characteristics of the voters. However, we

can compare our “guesstimates” for respondents with their actual self-reported demographic data from their exit poll questionnaires. We cannot match the observed and actual values for individual respondents, but we can look at the overall distribution.

We guessed respondents’ sexes with 100 percent accuracy (see table 3 below). We also were almost 100 percent accurate guessing respondents’ races.

Table 3. Observed vs. actual respondent demographics

	Number of observations	
	Guess	Actual
Sex		
Male	13	13
Female	17	17
Age		
18-34	7	11
35-54	14	9
55 and over	9	10
Race/ ethnicity		
Black	6	6
Hispanic	1	2
White	21	21
Other/ don’t know	2	1

For the three age groups, we tended to group people in the middle age category. It can be very hard to determine people’s ages, especially those who appear to fall right on the dividing line between the age groups. Just to be sure that our guesses were not statistically different from the actual ages, we did independent t-tests to confirm that there is no difference between the two distributions (35-54 to 18-34, p-value=0.63; 35-54 to 55+, p-value=0.39).

It appears that we were very accurate in guessing voters’ demographics and can have confidence that our observed values for the nonrespondents are also accurate.

5. Polling results

This section provides results from our exit poll and compares them to actual election outcomes or other exit polls (copies of all scanned questionnaires are provided in Appendix C). This analysis presents unweighted results because a simple nonresponse adjustment for sex resulted in virtually no change in the estimates.⁴

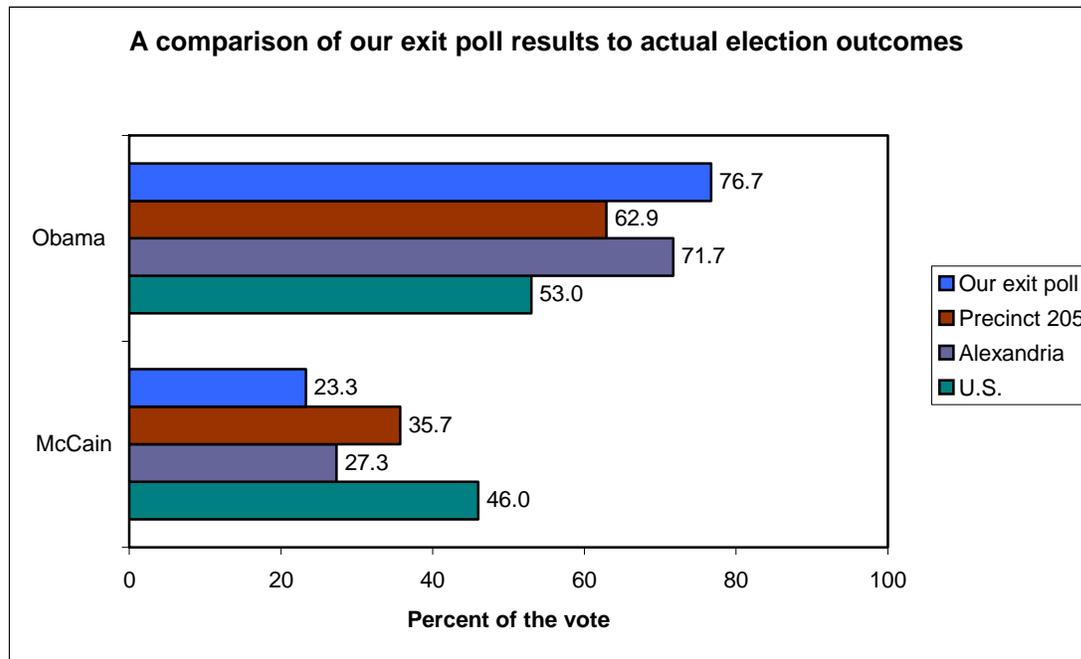
⁴ In our poll, men had a much lower cooperation rate than did women. Even though the rates were not statistically different, there is still a chance that nonresponse bias could exist in the estimates. Weights were calculated as $[\text{Respondents} + \text{Nonrespondents}] / \text{Respondents}$ for both men and women. The weight was higher for men (1.85) than for women (1.24) because men had a higher nonresponse rate. When calculating

There was virtually no difference between Jill and Betty in the number of votes respondents cast for each candidate. When Jill was interceptor, respondents had 12 votes for Obama and 3 for McCain; similarly, Betty’s respondents had 11 votes for Obama and 4 for McCain. Since there was virtually no difference, interceptor bias in the estimates should be minimal.

5.1 Results of “horse-race” question: who won the vote?

The findings of our exit poll showed Obama won the Presidential horse-race question with 76.7 percent of the vote (see chart 1 below). This was almost 14 percentage points higher than the actual vote outcome for this precinct. However, an independent t-test indicated that this difference was not significant (p-value=0.58).

Chart 1.



The findings of our exit poll were much closer to the actual election results for the entire City of Alexandria, which voted for Obama by a larger margin than our precinct. Our poll only differed by 0.5 percent points from the actual Alexandria vote outcome.

the unweighted percent of the vote for Obama, where a 1= vote for Obama and a 0 = vote for McCain, men’s and women’s votes count equally and sum to the number of respondents (30). With the weighted percent of the vote, men’s votes count for 1.85 and women’s count for 1.24. The sum of the men’s and women’s weights is 45, which is the total number of people sampled. In order to account for nonresponse among men and women, a weight was applied to estimates that accounted for higher nonresponse among men. However, the unweighted and weighted vote percentages for Obama and McCain were virtually unchanged. The unweighted Obama percentage of the vote was 76.67 percent, and the weighted percent was 76.71 percent.

Even though our poll results differed greatly from the actual U.S. vote, the results were not significantly different (p-value=0.35). Overall, our exit poll was accurate for predicting the winner of the Presidential vote.

5.2 Results by demographic group

There was virtually no difference in who respondents chose for president between men and women. About 76.5 percent of men and 76.9 percent of women voted for Obama (see chart 2).

About 80 percent of voters in the youngest and oldest age categories voted for Obama, compared to only about 67 percent of voters in the middle age group (see chart 3). This result is different from the 2008 Virginia exit polls conducted by The Associated Press and Edison Media Research which showed that McCain received the most support from voters in the oldest age groups.⁵

Results also varied by race. Unsurprisingly, Obama received all of the Black votes. About 30 percent of whites and 33 percent of people of other races voted for McCain (see chart 4). These results are consistent with other 2008 election exit polls.

The vote outcome by household income level also produced some interesting results. In general, voters with higher household incomes tended to vote for McCain (see chart 5). Interestingly, McCain received the greatest support among voters in the \$75,000-99,999 income bracket. Voters in the highest income bracket split their votes equally between Obama and McCain.

While about 20 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for Obama, no self-identified Democrats voted for McCain. Independents favored Obama, by a 7 percentage point margin (57 percent for Obama, 43 percent for McCain). This result is also consistent with other exit polls (see chart 6).

⁵ Official 2008 exit poll results can be found at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#VAP00p1>.

Chart 2.

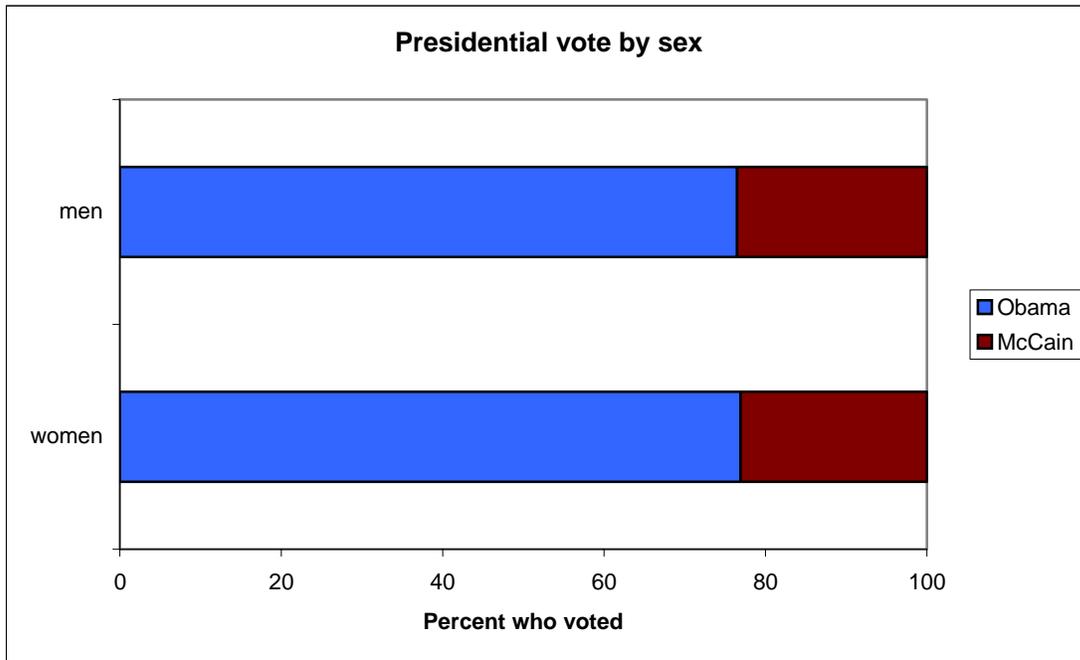


Chart 3.

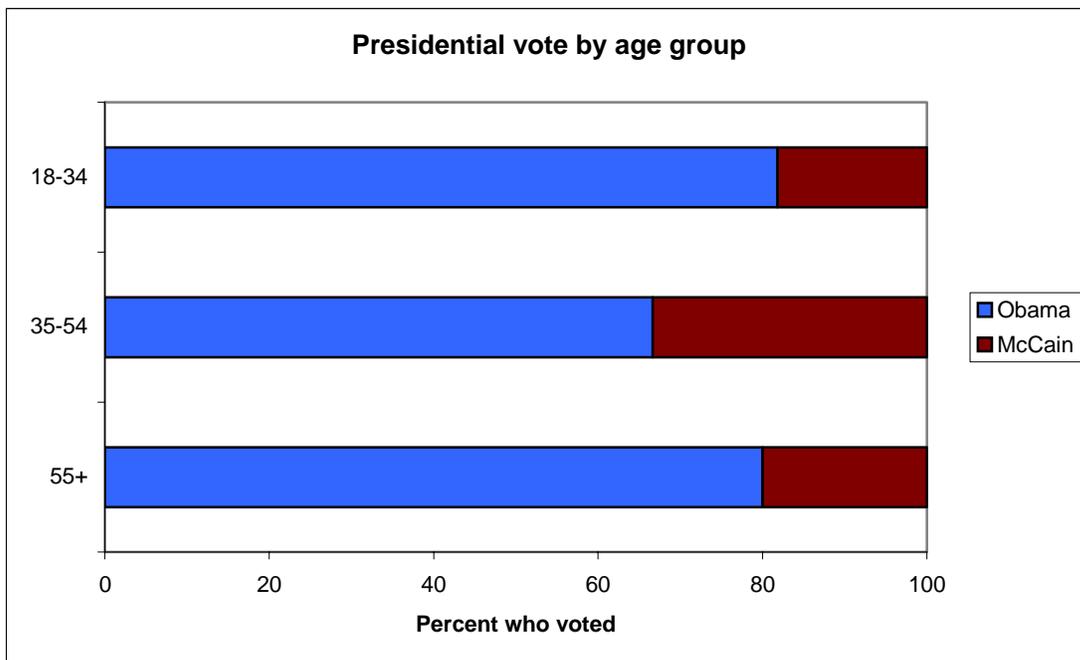


Chart 4.

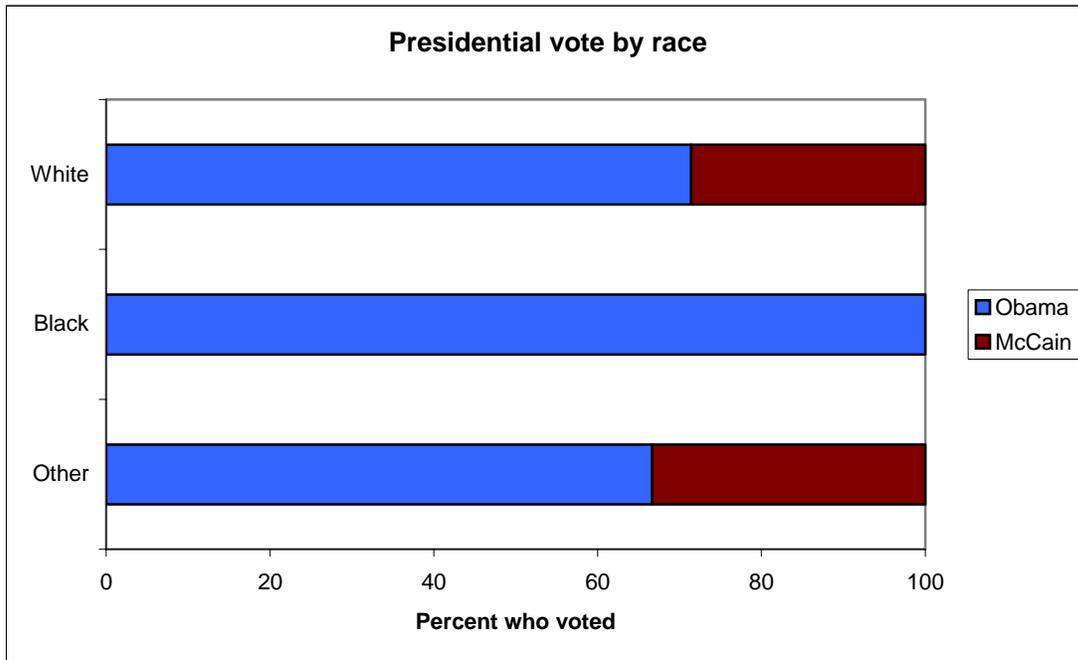


Chart 5.

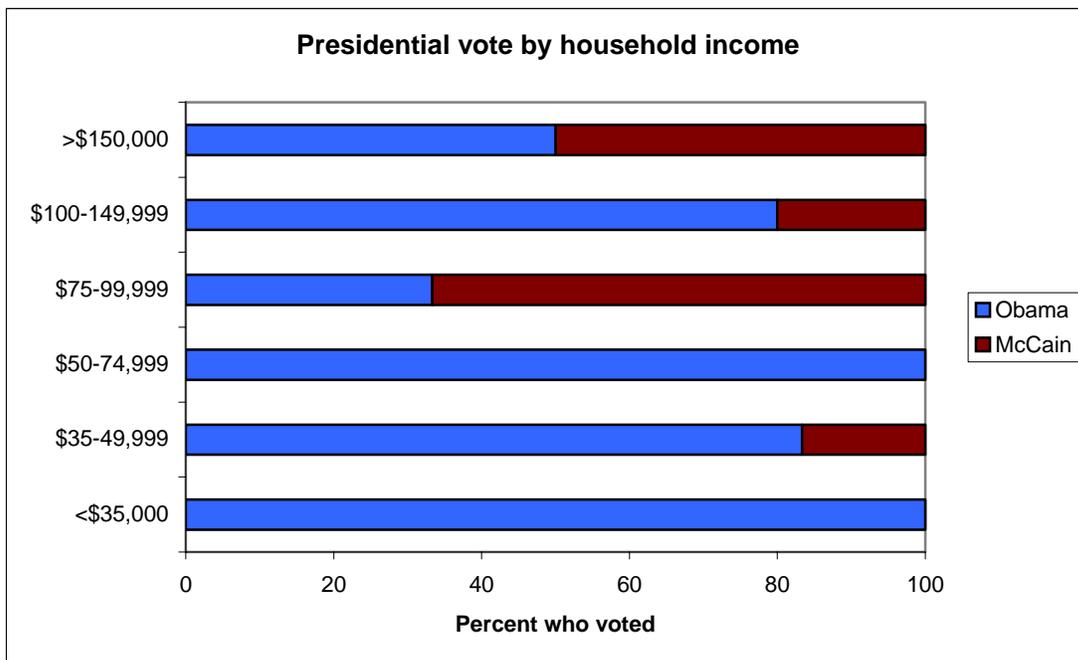
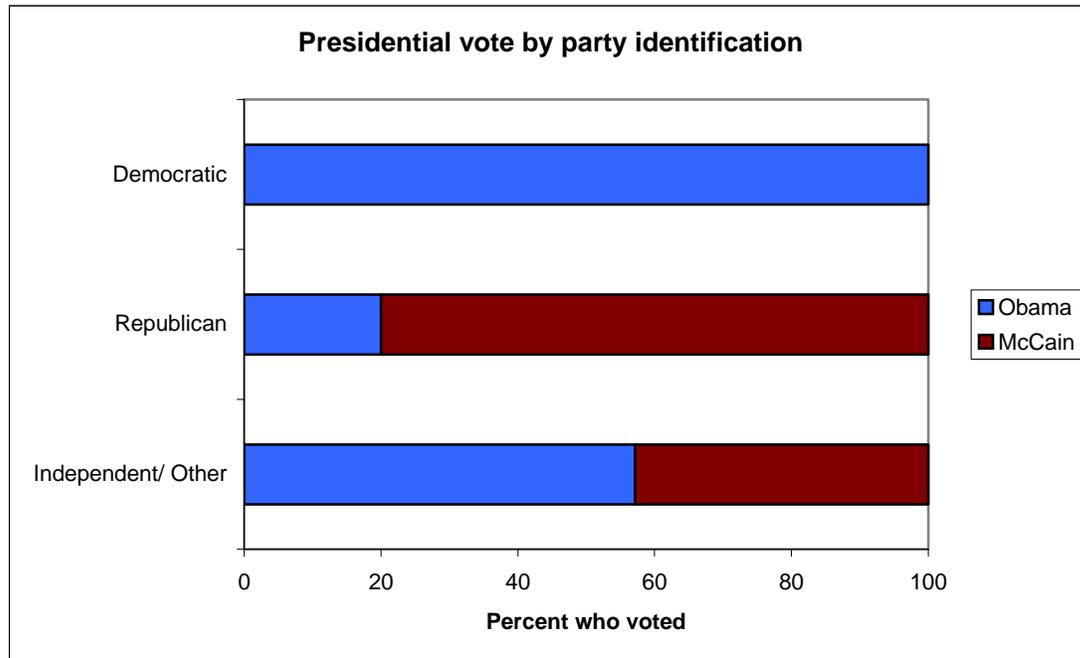


Chart 6.



5.3 Other results

There were also questions on the exit poll that asked about levels of excitement for the candidate, when voters had decided on the candidate they would vote for, and which issues were important to them.

Obama voters indicated they were much more excited about him as their candidate than were McCain voters (see chart 7). About 78 percent of Obama voters said they were very excited about him as their candidate, compared to only 29 percent of McCain voters. However, about 10 percent of Obama voters were not at all excited about him as their candidate.

Obama voters also made up their minds about voting for him sooner than did McCain voters. Of voters who made their minds up more than three months before the election, about 90 percent voted for Obama (see chart 8). However, voters who did not decide until the week prior to the election favored McCain by a 2-to-1 margin.

Voters were asked on a 5-point scale, where 1 was not important and 5 was very important, how important several issues were in determining their votes for President. Both Obama and McCain voters gave the highest score to the economy (mean=4.7 for both candidates; see chart 9). Obama and McCain voters also gave similar scores for both foreign policy and health care. However, McCain voters rated energy higher than did Obama voters (mean, McCain: 4.4; mean, Obama: 4.0).

Chart 7.

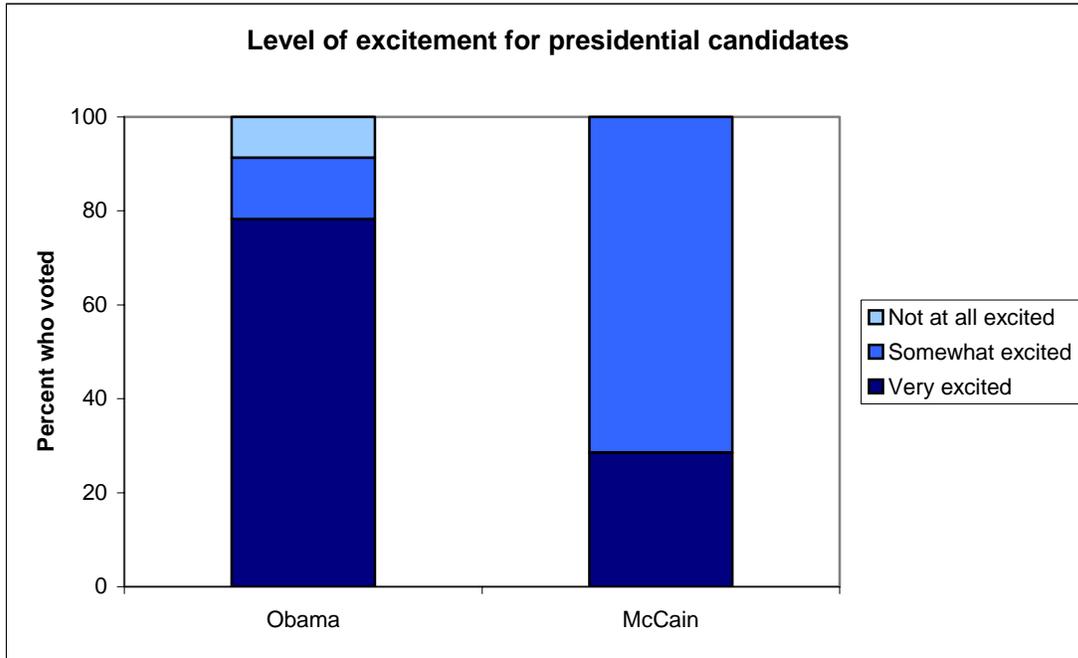


Chart 8.

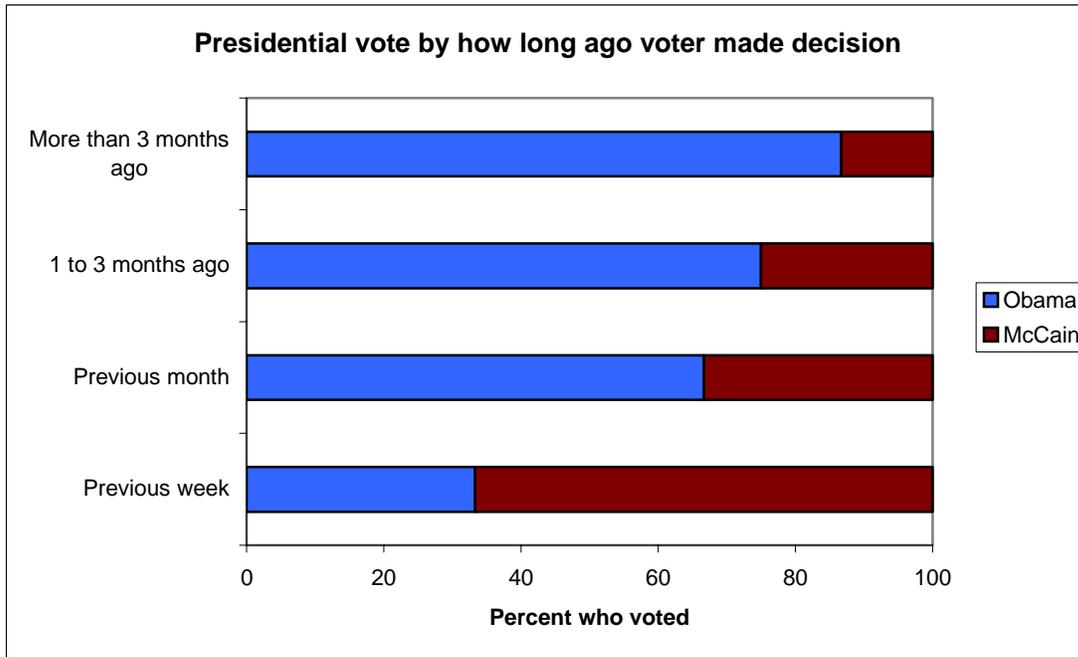
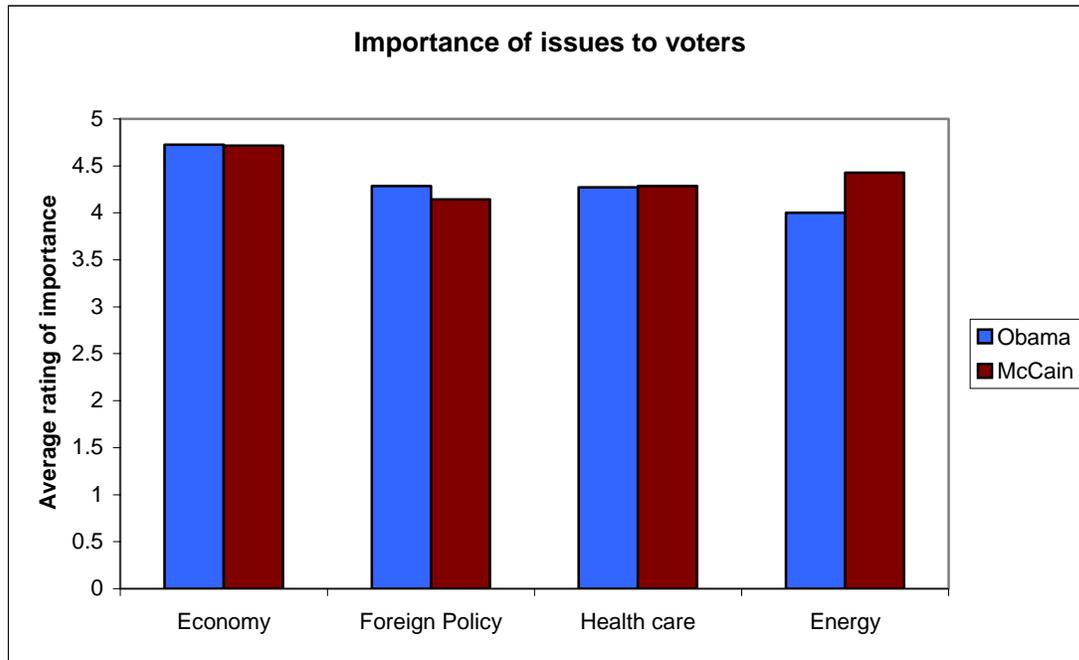


Chart 9.



5.4 Discussion of results

Overall, our exit poll results seemed to mirror results from exit polls conducted by national pollsters, except for age. However, our results should be used with caution for several reasons. Our sample size was small, which can increase the sampling error, especially for estimates of subpopulations. Data also were only collected from one precinct, and may only be representative of the Douglas MacArthur precinct in Alexandria. Our results are not representative of the City of Alexandria, the State of Virginia, or the United States.

However, our exit poll results also may not be representative of our precinct. Even though our results were not statistically different from the actual precinct results, we did have a much higher proportion of voters who voted for Obama. There could be several explanations for this. Data were only collected during a 2-hour period on Election Day, even though the polls were open for 13 hours. Since different people tend to vote at different times of day, we likely missed people with different characteristics who voted in the morning or in the evening. For example, older people tend to start their days earlier and may have voted in larger numbers in the morning. People who worked full-time also likely voted either before or after work.

The difference also could be due to nonresponse among mostly older white males, a group who generally supported McCain in the election. In the 2004 Presidential election, exit polls overstated support for Kerry. One of the reasons given was that older Bush supporters had higher nonresponse rates (Edison Media Research, 2008). Even though only 6 older white males refused to participate in our exit poll, they could have made a difference in the results. Assuming all 6 refusals were McCain supporters (which is a big

assumption), the proportion of McCain support in our poll would have risen from 23.3 percent to 37.9 percent, which is much closer the actual precinct vote outcome of 35.7 percent.

6. Lessons learned

All things considered, we learned a lot about survey management by conducting this exit poll. Here are some of the most important things we learned that future novice exit pollsters may find helpful:

- Teamwork is essential! Because we only had half of a semester to prepare for the exit poll, we could not complete every task alone. Each Alexandria exit poll team member focused on his/her assigned tasks. As a result, we finished all tasks on time and produced high quality work.
- Gantt charts are useful tools that helped us to finish our work on time. The process of constructing the Gantt chart forces group members to think clearly about what must be done to accomplish our goal. Keeping the chart updated as the project proceeds helps manage the project and avoid schedule problems.
- It is essential to have a clearly defined objective about what the exit poll is trying to measure. Once the objective is clear, constructing the questionnaire becomes much easier to do.
- When planning an exit poll, communication is very important so that all team members can express their opinions, reach a consensus, and carry out the tasks. Each week our team would get together to discuss issues that needed to be solved and tasks that needed to be completed. We also kept in constant contact through e-mail.
- Pretesting the process is critical in order to maintain data quality on the day of the actual exit poll. Pretesting helped us determine how to divide up the interceptor and recorder tasks and how to deal with unexpected situations. For example, we realized that not everyone leaving the poll is a voter. As a result, a “not eligible” category was added to our nonresponse sheet. Pretesting also allowed us to perfect our opening script and made us realize that conducting an exit poll was not such a scary task as it first appeared to be!
- A useful way to minimize nonresponse is by giving a clear introduction about us and the purpose of the poll, by being friendly and talking clearly with respondents, and by providing a ballot box and making sure their answers were confidential.

However, there are also things we did not do that could assure better data quality in the future:

- More precise results can be obtained by increasing the sample size and by collecting data throughout the day.
- Bring a lot of clipboards! Having more than one clipboard can help reduce the number of missed respondents from not having enough materials. At the beginning of our poll, we missed several respondents because voters exited in large numbers and we didn't have enough clipboards to hand them. Luckily, we had spare clipboards and were able to transfer questionnaires to the additional clipboards to hand to

respondents. Had we had additional clipboards in the beginning, our miss rate would have been much lower.

All things considered, this was our first time conducting an exit poll and we had a lot to learn about the process. However, we still obtained higher than average response rates and results that were generally representative of the precinct.

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