



The Winston Group

To: Interested Parties
From: David Winston
Date: March 10, 2008
Re: Party Identification and Public Polling – An Update

In the first week of October in 2006, we did a comparison of the party identification in several public polls which had just been released and the historical results seen in election exit polls done by VNS and EMR from 1992 forward. In that comparison, we found the samples in the early October public polls had larger margins favoring Democrats than in any exit poll results from 1992 forward. In the public polls the range of party identification favored Democrats anywhere from +5 to +11. In the historical results the range was +2 for Republicans to +4 for Democrats.

The analysis was written about a month before the 2006 election. So what was the final outcome?

+2 for Democrats – well within the historical range, and outside the range of any of the public polls.

So why bring this up again? Because as the public polls focus on the 2008 general election environment, it is important that polling entities, media, academic, and partisan, disclose the party identification figures used in their samples. When reading a poll, the first and most important fact to check is whether the poll sample is within the range of historical election results. If the sample falls outside that margin, the pollster should acknowledge that this is an historical anomaly and explain why this is about to occur. Even in years of dramatic change like 1994 or 2006, party identification remained within historical ranges. When polls are released with party ID numbers that represent, in effect, a historically huge shift in party affiliation with no explanation for such a shift, the results have to be considered questionable.

Party identification generally has the largest impact on the outcome of political polls of any demographic. 85-95% of Democrats and Republicans tend to support generic candidates of their party, or have more confidence in their party to handle a particular issue. That's why they became a Republican or Democrat in the first place. Consequently, if you have a disproportionate number of interviews from members of one party, either more or less, the results will be skewed.

INDEPENDENTS DRIVE DRAMATIC SHIFTS:

The argument has also been made that party identification fluctuates significantly and that the public polls are merely a “snapshot in time.” But the historical results belie that claim. In the

last eight elections, the percentage of general election voters who self identified as Republican ranged just 4% - 36% to 40%. In fact, for six of the eight elections, the Republican percentage was 36% exactly. For voters identifying themselves as Democrats, the range was also 36% to 40%. Self identification in both parties is remarkably consistent despite some dramatic elections like 1994 when Republicans took over Congress after 50 years of Democrat control, and 2006 when Democrats took the Congress back. In 1994 party identification was even at 36, and in 2006 Democrats had a slight advantage at 38-36, hardly the near double digit figures seen in public polls about a month out from the 2006 election.

Past Party Identification of the Voting Electorate in House Elections from Exit Polls (VNS/EMR)

PARTY ID	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
REP	36	36	36	36	36	40	38	36
DEM	39	36	40	37	39	38	38	38
IND	25	27	25	27	26	22	25	26
Margin	-3	0	-4	-1	-3	+2	0	-2

What caused the shift in 1994 and 2006? Looking through just the lens of party identification, it was not the dramatic shift of voters changing from one party to the other; it was the voting behavior of self defined Independents. In 1992, Democrats won Independents by a 54-46 margin. In 1994, Republicans won Independents by a 55-41 margin. That was a shift of -8 to +14.

In 2004, Republicans lost Independents by a 46-49 margin, the first time they had lost them since 1994. In 2006, Republicans lost Independents by a 39-57 margin. This represented a shift of -3 to -18. In both elections, the change was driven by a shift among Independents not a significant change in party identification. So the idea that there are double-digit swings in party identification, even in the election years when Congress switched hands, is not substantiated by the exit poll data. (There were other groups that significantly changed how they voted, such as Catholics, but this memo is specifically looking at political behavior based on party identification.)

That brings up the question as to whether the exit poll data is the best data set for evaluation purposes. We believe it is for two key reasons.

First the sample size is huge. In 2006, the national level sample was 13,251 as compared to most public national polls that range from 800 to 1,500 respondents.

Second, data was adjusted to reflect actual precinct returns in which the samples were taken, so that the final election data set was based not on just exit polls, but on actual results as well.