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Description

In the run-up to the 1992 presidential election, pollsters face a tough challenge figuring out the frontrunner in the three-way race between Governor Bill Clinton, President George H.W. Bush and businessman Ross Perot. This live interview with Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll, looks at polling methodology and the reasons why the race is too close to call.

Keywords

Transcript
Gallup Poll’s Methodology Before 1992 Presidential Election

KATHERINE COURIC, co-host:
On CLOSE UP this morning, the latest Presidential polls. If the election were held today, the Gallup organization says it would be too close to call. Gallup editor--Editor In Chief Frank Newport is here with the results of the latest USA Today/CNN/Gallup survey.

Good morning, Frank.
Mr. FRANK NEWPORT: Good morning, Katie.

COURIC: Well, tell us what your--these latest numbers show.

Mr. NEWPORT: As you mentioned, when we look at likely voters, which is what we're looking at now, which is what's being discussed, we have Clinton at 40 and Bush at 38 and Perot at 16. What we want to focus on, as we've been talking about all along, is trends, and there's no way around it. No matter how you look at it, the trends are for the gap to be narrowing now. It is getting closer.

COURIC: Most of the other polls that are out, Frank, show the Clinton lead anywhere from 7-10 points, although we should note that a new NBC/Wall Street Journal overnight tracking poll of likely voters shows that to be a five point gap right now. But why two points for Gallup and--and 7-10 for most of the other major polls?

Mr. NEWPORT: Well, they're going to vary. We--we at Gallup feel we're using all the expertise we've developed since Franklin Roosevelt. We've done more interviews than the other people and we think our estimate is as good or better, obviously, than these other polls. But there's really not--I think we focus a little too much on these rather micro-differences. The New York Times this morning pointed out the average gap in the very latest polls is maybe about six points. And there's really not huge differences between those kinds of numbers. But we've shifted to likely voters using the methodology we've used over the years, and we think that's a pretty good estimate of what's happening.

COURIC: Why--why don't we explain that methodology to viewers, what you're doing differently now...

Mr. NEWPORT: Sure.

COURIC: ...in terms of likely voters ver--vs. registered voters.

Mr. NEWPORT: Yeah. It's a very good question. And Gallup, historically, has always, as we neared the election, moved our estimates of the vote from the total pool of registered voters, who never all turn out, to those that we can gauge are most likely to turn out and vote on Election Day, because it makes the predictions more accurate. Not everybody votes.

COURIC: So you ask, `Are you registered,' and then you say, `Are you going to vote?'

Mr. NEWPORT: Well, it's a little more complex than that.

COURIC: Right, but basically.

Mr. NEWPORT: That's the idea. We have a series of seven different questions we use and that's right. We put those into a formula and then we come out with our best estimate of who we think's actually going to turn out.

COURIC: What about Bill Clinton's complaint and--and some of the complaints we've been hearing from the Clinton campaign, that this skews against newly registered voters, young voters and working voters?
Mr. NEWPORT: Well, there is a slight tendency, if you look at any past historical race, it's true. Older people are more likely to vote, more upscale people are more likely to vote, and that's what we find. That misses the point, though. Even if we look at 100 percent turnout of registered voters in our data, we're down to only like a four or six point race, and that still shows a very narrowing trend from what we've seen before.

COURIC: I understand that this latest poll was taken Monday and Tuesday.
Mr. NEWPORT: That's right.
COURIC: Which voters has George Bush been able to pick up to narrow the--the gap?
Mr. NEWPORT: Yeah. To some degree, he is picking up on his traditional constituency. Republicans, a little more, are coming back to him. Independents who've been voting for Perot look like they're moving a little more back to him. Suburban voters, which has been part of the Reagan/Bush coalition, look like they're moving back over to George Bush and that includes more upscale, college-educated voters.
COURIC: Suburban voters moving back because of some of his tax and spend arguments are--are--are coming home to them, that is right?
Mr. NEWPORT: Yeah. It--it could be. That's a reasonable hypothesis.
Some of them could have deserted to Perot as well, and as we've been talking about here, Perot kind of peaked, and he's leveling off and now actually settling, and some of those people may be shifting back over from Mr. Perot back over to Mr. Bush at this point.