

MRA Helps Legalize Exit Polling at Voting Places in Minnesota

By Howard Fienberg, PLC

Until recently, it was illegal for survey and opinion researchers to conduct exit polling at Minnesota voting places. Following a 2008 lawsuit by the National Election Pool (made up of ABC, The Associated Press, CNN, CBS, Fox News and NBC), the Minnesota legislature sought to correct the law – and MRA helped them accomplish this task.

The Law

The previous Minnesota law (Minnesota Statutes 2008, section 204C.06, subdivision 1) did not allow anyone “except an election official or an individual who is waiting to register or to vote” near a voting place. The new law, H.F. 3108, signed by the governor on April 1, adds to that exception, “or an individual who is conducting exit polling” and defines exit polling as “approaching voters in a predetermined pattern as they leave the polling place after they have voted and asking voters to fill out an anonymous, written questionnaire.”

What are Exit Polls and Why are They Important?

The typical exit poll questionnaire gathers three types of data: 1) who the research participant voted for in the day’s key elections in a particular jurisdiction (a state or city); 2) a variety of attitudes held by the voter; and 3) the demographic characteristics of the voter. The latter two sets of information can be used to explain why they voted as they did and what kinds of people voted for each candidate. These exit poll questionnaires are relatively short (typically less than 25 questions) and take less than five minutes to complete.

Most people think of election night projections on TV when they think of exit polls. This research, however, is just as important for the information gathered about the voters’ demographics and attitudinal predispositions towards the candidates and the campaign issues as it is for making the

projections reported by news organizations on election night.

It is this data that provides powerful explanations, to be examined in election postmortems and by academics and researchers forever after, for why people voted the way they did - telling us which key demographic groups voted for which candidates or which propositions and why.

Exit Polling v. Regular Polling

According to Joseph Lenski of Edison Media Research, who has done exit polling for the National Election Pool, “Exit polls provide accurate data about voter behavior because of the near certainty that persons interviewed have actually voted.”

Finally, exit polls do something pre-election polls cannot do: capture the voting intent of last minute deciders. In 2004, 5% of voters made up their minds on who to vote for on election day, according to exit polls. Eleven percent decided who to vote for in the last week before the election.

Exit pollsters’ access to voting places and voters is essential to this kind of research.

Lenski laments that the quality and quantity of exit polling data drops when exit pollsters can’t have proper access to the voting place. This is because interviewers are supposed to approach voters in a preset pattern (e.g., every fourth or fifth voter). The further from the voting place the interviewers must stand, the greater the chances of a needed voter disappearing by car without being approached or blending into a crowd that includes people who didn’t vote.

He also claims that error rates were many times higher in the 2004 and 2006 elections, when exit pollsters were kept away from some Minnesota voting places.

MRA Helps Turn a Good Legislative Idea into Law

MRA endorsed H.F. 3108 shortly after

Rep. Ryan Winkler (DFL) introduced it (as we did for Senator Sieben’s S.F. 2388). We were particularly appreciative that Senator Sieben and Rep. Winkler allowed for all bona fide exit polling in their bills because another effort -- H.F. 2566, introduced by Rep. Gene Pelowski (DFL) - only would have allowed exit polling conducted by “a representative of the press.” It is important to note that a majority of exit polling is actually conducted by survey and opinion research organizations and companies, not just TV news organizations.

An MRA volunteer later testified at a hearing before the House Committee on State and Local Government Operations Reform, Technology and Elections. On March 4, Gayle Belkengren, President of the MRA Minnesota/Upper Midwest Chapter and a member of the MRA State Capital Network, spoke in defense of exit polling. She answered several questions from the Representatives - not all of them very friendly - and represented the entire research profession with great aplomb.

MRA will continue to lobby to protect exit polling in other states. For more information on this or any other legislative/regulatory issues impacting the research profession in the United States, contact the profession’s lobbyist at howard.fienberg@mra-net.org or 202-775-5170.



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