

## Mitchell's Musings 11-17-14: Off-Beat Poll Suggests How Little We (the Voters) Know

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I attended a seminar at UCLA featuring several political science experts giving their reactions to the recent November general election. The panelists were mainly focused at the federal offices – House and Senate – but with some reference to state-level outcomes. Although not the focus of this musing, for those wondering, these were some of the conclusions:

- The notion that the Democrats did badly due to low turnout was debunked. Various convincing statistical charts based on historical data were unveiled showing that midterm elections with low turnout did not especially favor Republicans.
- The variable that did affect midterm election results was how favorably or unfavorably voters viewed the President. If he had low favorability ratings, his party did poorly. Again, statistics over time backed up this point.
- There is a potential longer-term effect of the most recent election. The Democrats lost seats in state legislatures and in governorships. The result is that their “minor leagues” are damaged, which means there will be fewer Democratic candidates to promote into the majors (governors, senators, congressional representatives). In the political context, what’s called succession planning in business comes down to have elected officials in lower offices who can be promoted. Texas was cited as a state in which the Democrats don’t have a strong minor league which hurts them in finding candidates to promote. California was cited as a state in which Republicans don’t have a strong minor league which also hurts them in finding candidates to promote.
- It isn’t really true that what voters want nowadays is for the two parties to cooperate and compromise to get things done. Increasingly, voters are polarized and want their party’s perceived policies to prevail. My way or the highway is the prevailing mood.
- Pollsters don’t have good systems for separating “likely voters” from other respondents to their surveys.

I am an amateur in such matters so I will take the top two points as proven. I would have liked to hear more about *why* President Obama had low favorability ratings, but that issue didn’t come up. The third point seems reasonable and at least in California seems to be mainly true. (But let me come back to that topic below.)

On the fourth point, I would also have liked more discussion beyond the immediate consequences. There seemed to be a consensus on the panel that even if voters did want compromise and getting things done, they were unlikely to get that outcome – not just in the coming two years but over the long run. Voters are also unlikely to get an uncompromised version of what they think their party supports. The panelists didn’t go into the implications, i.e., what are the long-term implications of voters being perpetually disappointed, election after election? I have a sense that continued voter frustration itself may be a Bad Thing.

What did strike me was the discussion on public opinion polling and the problems thereof, the last bullet-point item above. In fact, several Mitchell's Musings have been devoted to that issue, but at a less technical level than the panel addressed. However, shortly before Election Day, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a column about what seemed to be an odd poll result.

First, some background. As it happened, the November 2014 election in California was headed by the governor's "race." I put "race" in quotes because the outcome was never in question; Jerry Brown would be elected as governor. Nonetheless, Brown is the governor so what he does gets news coverage. There was a primary election in June in which he was on the ballot as a prelude for November. News media have covered the two elections, both the primary and the November general vote. Brown was running for an unprecedented fourth term, no longer allowed for any candidate in the future due to term limits (which he escaped). No other California governor has served four terms. (Earl Warren was elected three times as governor.) So that fact of the election was newsworthy because of that unusual feature.

There was also some interest in the primary because under the top-2 primary rules, the issue effectively became who would come in second behind Brown and it was clear it would be one of two Republicans. One of the two was a member of the legislature, a Tea Party type named Tim Donnelly who had a habit of making provocative and controversial remarks. And there was also an unknown former U.S. Treasury official – Neel Kashkari - who the establishment of the Party was backing because it did not want a Tea Party candidate at the head of the ticket. (You can see the Republicans' "minor league" problem in California mentioned earlier in the personalities of these two candidates.)

The result was that Kashkari, the establishment's favored candidate in the primary, had debates on AM talk radio with his opponent Donnelly. And the race between them got media attention. The Republican establishment also provided enough monetary support to make Kashkari Brown's opponent in the general election. Finally, there was a debate on TV between Brown and Kashkari, albeit one that was scheduled at an inconvenient time thanks to Brown's insistence. Still, some soundbites from the debate aired on newscasts and were picked up in the newspapers.

I am telling you all of this because of that item – published just days before the general election - in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that was referenced above: [excerpt]

*Here's an eye-opener: With the election Tuesday, a whopping 4 out of 10 voters don't even know Gov. Jerry Brown is running for another term. "Isn't that astonishing?" said David Metz of the polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz and Associates. Metz included the question, "As far as you know, is Gov. Jerry Brown up for re-election this year?" on a statewide survey of 457 likely voters last week. Metz said the question was prompted by several casual conversations he'd had with people not involved in politics. "I was struck by how many of them were totally unaware that Brown was up for re-election, so I decided to test it out," he said. The findings: Forty-two percent of likely voters didn't know Brown was running — and only about 1 in 5 could name Republican Neel Kashkari as his opponent...*

Full story at <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/matier-ross/article/40-of-voters-unaware-Jerry-Brown-is-seeking-5865196.php>

It might be noted that the firm that conducted the poll is linked to Jerry Brown and has no particular reason to highlight the fact that folks didn't know he was running.

Now there were special circumstances surrounding the gubernatorial election. Because Brown knew he would win, he barely campaigned. He appeared in TV ads but those ads, which were plentiful, were endorsements of two ballot propositions he was supporting. One involved a bond for water projects. The other was to establish a "rainy day" fund in the state budget. (Both passed.) The ads did not specifically ask voters to vote for Brown although he did all the talking. Kashkari did run ads in a limited way. But after the establishment of his Party put him on the ballot via the primary, they did not choose to throw a lot of money into a general election campaign that would lose anyway. So his ads were aired sparsely for lack of money.

Nonetheless, the fact is that pollsters typically give voters a choice of named candidates. Evidently, that is more information than many voters actually had. Naming the candidates when voters don't know they are going to be on the ballot is a form of framing, even if it was inadvertent.

So what did the standard voter opinion polls show? Here is a table from the California Field Poll, a long time and respected operation in the state:

<b>Trend of likely voter preferences for Governor in the November 2014 general election</b>			
	<b><u>Brown (D)</u></b>	<b><u>Kashkari (R)</u></b>	<b><u>Undecided</u></b>
<b>Late October 2014</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>13</b>
Late August/Early Sept. 2014	50%	34	16
June 2014	52%	32	16

*(D) denotes Democrat, (R) denotes Republican.*

Only 13% in late October were said to be undecided by Field between two candidates *who were named*. No one apparently said "who?" about Kashkari when he was named. No one apparently said "I didn't know he was running" when Brown was named.<sup>1</sup> When it came to the actual election, Brown got 59% of the vote and Kashkari got 41%.<sup>2</sup>

Now you could say that by confronting voters with the information that there was a gubernatorial election and who the candidates were, the Field Poll was simulating what (surprised) voters would have learned when they got into the voting booth or filled out their mail ballots. Suddenly, they would discover Brown was running. And the Field Poll did say Brown would win by a large margin (which was not a hard result to forecast). However, it's hard to get away from the fact that a major piece of information was missing – because no one thought to ask. The

<sup>1</sup><http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2489.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://vote.sos.ca.gov/returns/governor/>

poll didn't ask if you knew that 2014's general election was gubernatorial and who the candidates were. If poll takers inadvertently stumbled on that information from *ad hoc* comments of respondents, their finding didn't make it into the published results. Or maybe respondents just didn't say.

So now let's go back to that seminar I attended on the election. Yes, questions were raised about accuracy of poll results. But they focused on technical issues such as adjusting the sample to mirror who would actually vote. The question of how to conduct a poll *without asking a question that suggested something to respondents that they didn't know* didn't come up.

Is all this a fluke? Maybe California was unique in voter in 2014 in the degree of voter ignorance. But polling often entails the asking of questions – particularly when it comes to complicated ballot propositions – that involve more than just the names of the candidates who are running. It's hard to get results from respondents if large portions of them don't know what you are talking about or what is on the ballot or what it means. So the temptation is to “explain” things to the folks you survey. And how you explain will inevitably influence the answers you obtain. Keep that in mind the next time you read a poll.