Who Changes Their Minds About Propositions?
Attempting to Explain Why Support for Propositions (Almost) Inevitably Goes Down

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom says that a California ballot proposition that starts off in polling below 50% support will rarely win. In fact, the conventional wisdom holds that support for propositions falls during the course of the campaigns. This paper tests this conventional wisdom, using all those propositions surveyed on by the Field Corporation from 1997 to 2010. The conventional wisdom is surprisingly accurate. The paper also explores who changes their minds over the course of the campaigns, using data from 1958-2007, drawing on a meta-analysis of 388 regressions of support for 179 different propositions over 114 different Field Polls. Changes in support seem nearly universal and fit a story of campaign effects.

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"The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking"
-John Kenneth Galbraith

Political scientists often like to disparage the "conventional wisdom." Doing so serves to distinguish academia from the masses. But, as John Kenneth Galbraith's famous quote reminds us, it is also squarely within the academic functions of learning and teaching, for the conventional wisdom is often wrong, or at least misleading.

The problem with testing "the conventional wisdom" is that it is often a hard concept to nail down. There are often competing versions of what that "conventional wisdom" is—making it hardly "conventional!" They are often unclearly stated. When they are clear, they often speak of absolutes, a level of proof rarely used in empirical (particularly quantitative) political science.

All of this does not preclude using "conventional wisdom" as an inspiration to derive theory from. What it does, though, is induce caution in interpreting findings as definitively rejecting or confirming these theories, since they are not necessarily based in a concrete logic, but are often purely inductive observations.

This paper attempts to test one nugget of conventional wisdom that I have heard from political consultants and academics in California over the years: "if a proposition doesn't have majority support the first time it's polled on, it's going to lose."[1] There are a number of ways of interpreting this statement. In particular, what it means for a proposition to first poll "down" is open to interpretation. One way this could be understood is if fewer people support it than oppose it—a majority of those with an opinion, in other words A second way is that a proposition first polls support below 50%—an absolute majority. Corollaries or alternative versions of this conventional wisdom include:

[1] This is a *very* preliminary draft of this paper. In particular, there is no real treatment of the existing scholarly literature in this version, for which I apologize.

--“support for propositions always goes down.” This implies that the first version presented above is the product of a universal downward trend in support. Thus, polling above 50% at first indicates nothing more than some “cushion” for the inevitable loss of support. This version could be represented as: First Poll – X = Final Vote, where X is uniformly positive. Thus, if the first poll isn’t above 50%, it would guarantee the final vote would not be. Related to this corollary is the idea that support goes down more or less uniformly, thus meaning that there would be some better threshold—55%, 60%, 65%—that would more accurately predict passage or failure.

--“when in doubt, voters stick with the status quo.” This implies that the reason for propositions failing if they poll below majority support is that the undecided voters will break decisively against the proposition. This corollary thus leans more heavily on that second interpretation of what it means to poll “down.” For this version, a proposition that is ahead 52%-43% is much safer than one that polls 49%-40%, or possibly even one that polls 49%-45%. The focus of this wisdom is decidedly on the undecided voters.

Data and Analysis

The data for this paper come from the Field Polls conducted on initiatives from 1998 to 2010. Future work will expand this dataset to include the entire history of the Field Poll, which dates to 1947. The Field Poll was selected because it offers a continuous record of polling on initiatives in California, a state famous for their use. The Field Poll also has employed a consistent methodology in polling on initiatives, reducing the risk of question formats impacting the results.[2] The methodology of the Field Poll is elegant in its simplicity. Rather than attempting to figure out neutral phrasings for controversial issues, the Field Poll simply reads voters the official ballot language before asking respondents their vote intentions. This avoids the problem of biased language, for whatever bias is introduced in the question is identical to the bias facing the voter in the voting booth.

Patterns in the Data

California has kept up with its rather frenetic pace of direct democracy over the last decade. There have been 150 direct democracy votes in California since 1998; one of these votes was for the recall of Governor Gray Davis, and while there is polling on this question, it is excluded from this analysis. Of these votes, the Field Poll conducted surveys on 89 of these propositions (both initiatives and referenda), most of them multiple times. Table 1 summarizes the availability of polling data.

Table 1 Availability of Polling Data on California Propositions, 1998-2010

Total propositions	149
Propositions polled	89
Number of polls per proposition (mean)	3.19
Range of number of polls per proposition	1-6
Mean number of days between first poll and election[3]	120
Range of days between first poll and election	11-359

As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a great deal of variation in the amount of polling propositions receive. 40% of propositions on the ballot never get polled on. This is natural, as the

[2] The use of the Field Polls may reduce this risk, but it does not eliminate it. The Field Poll methodology means that changes in the official ballot language force changes in the questions asked of respondents. Such changes are relatively rare, however.

[3] Days between poll and election are determined by taking the median date of when the poll was in the field. In the case of Field Polls, almost all are in the field from 3-14 days, with most in the field for 4-8 days.

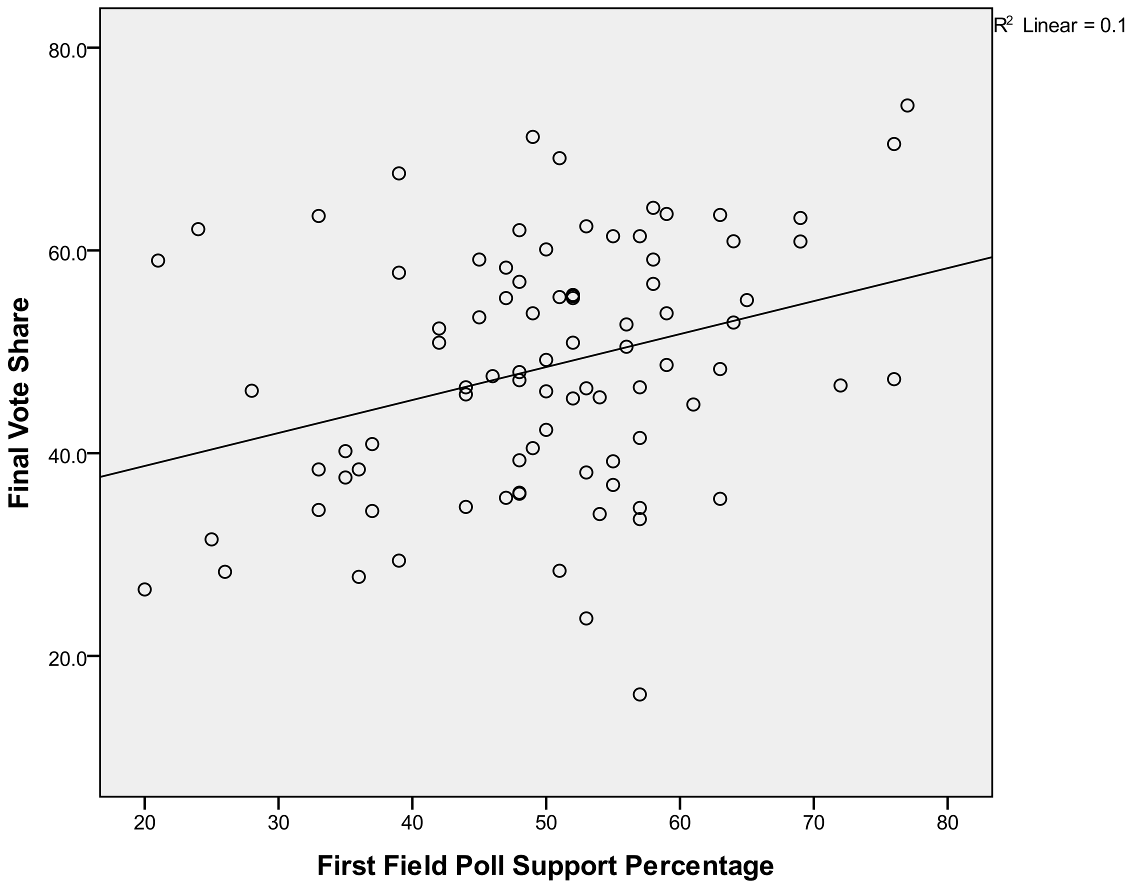
Field Poll is generally conducting polls for media clients, and many propositions are simply not that interesting. The large range of data available for various propositions owes a lot to the initiative process. Rumors of large signature drives can induce the Field Poll to survey opinions on an issue, only to later find that the initiative gets on a later ballot than was first assumed. Also, some issues don't seem interesting at first, and only later in the campaign do they seem worthy of polling.

Does Starting Down Guarantee Failure?

As noted above, the "conventional wisdom" regarding California ballot propositions isn't fully clear. One version of this conventional wisdom holds that if ballot propositions don't poll over 50% the first time, they are destined to fail. The weaker version simply holds that they must poll a majority amongst those who express an opinion. This paper will test both versions.

The outcome of proposition votes is related to their first poll results, but only weakly. The final vote outcome is correlated at 0.32 with the support level in the first poll, and correlated at 0.38 with that support only amongst those expressing an opinion. Figure 1 is a scatterplot of the first set of data. While not nothing, these data do no really suggest anything like an "iron law" is operating.

Figure 1 Scatterplot of Final Vote Share Versus First Poll % Support



This is not an indictment of the Field Poll data, however. The final Field Poll taken mere days before the election (usually in the week or fortnight before the election in question) is quite accurate. The correlation between the final vote outcome and these poll results is quite strong, 0.80 for the support level alone, and 0.87 amongst only those expressing an opinion. This improvement is likely due to two reasons. First, campaigns happen, and people change their minds. Second, the Field Poll's likely voter screen naturally improves as the election approaches, if only because voters can better answer questions regarding their likelihood of voting and interest in the election.

However, the conventional wisdom, naturally, is not about the Pearson correlation coefficient. Thus, we need a more direct test. Tables 2 and 3 are crosstabs of the final vote outcome and the first poll results for the strong and weak version, respectively.

Table 2 Crosstab of Vote Outcomes with First Poll Majority Support

	Polled below 50%	Polled above 50%
Failed	27 (63%)	20 (44%)
Passed	16 (37%)	26 (56%)

Chi-square: 3.326, p = .07

Table 3 Crosstab of Vote Outcomes with First Poll Plurality Support

	Polled behind	Polled ahead
Failed	15 (79%)	32 (46%)
Passed	4 (21%)	38 (54%)

Chi-square: 6.623, p = .01

At first look, the data in Tables 2 and 3 are only mildly supportive of the conventional wisdom. The key data is that in the first column of each table. The conventional wisdom doesn’t say that polling ahead on the initial poll means the proposition will pass, but that polling behind means it will fail. 37% of propositions that start out with less than majority support go on to fail. While polling below 50% does indicate that a proposition is more likely to fail, the difference is statistically insignificant and substantively quite small; three out of every eight propositions that start below 50% go on to pass. The results for the plurality are somewhat more convincing; only 21% of those that start behind go on to pass. Furthermore, data on one of these, Proposition 21 in 2000, is dubious. The first poll on Proposition 21 included only a short form description of the measure, as the Secretary of State was indicating at the time that most counties would use that form. However, a few weeks later, it was revealed that only a few smaller counties would use that version, whereas most voters would see a very different version. That different version polled much better in the Field Poll; 55% support versus 30% support for the short form, and 32% opposed (versus 47% opposed to the short form). Thus, it might be best to not drop that case (or include it as one that received both majority and plurality support in its first polling). If we drop this case, only 3 propositions that failed to get majority support on their first asking ended up passing (17%).

The other 3 propositions that initially polled down but passed are Propositions 57 and 64 in 2004, and Proposition 8 in 2008. Table 4 shows some summary information on these three propositions.

Table 4 Passed Propositions That Initially Polled Behind

	Proposition 57	Proposition 64	Proposition 8
Election	Primary 2004	General 2004	General 2008
Subject	Debt financing bond	Unfair business practices suits	Gay marriage ban
Final Vote Share	63%	59%	52%
First Field Poll Support/Oppose	33/40	21/41	42/51
Last Field Poll Support/Oppose	50/36	32/37	44/49

Proposition 57 is one that had a great deal of movement, from 33% support/40% opposed to 50% support/36% opposed in the final Field Poll. Proposition 64 had the highest proportion respond “don’t know” in the final Field Poll of any proposition in the dataset at 31%, and the second highest at the first Field Poll (38%). Proposition 8 is a particularly interesting case. Field Polls on gay marriage in California have consistently shown restrictions to be unpopular. In the Field Poll’s data, same sex marriage legality has been approved of by majorities or near majorities in

2008, 2009, and 2010. (Field Poll Release #2349) It seems that the Field Poll methodology consistently overstates support for gay marriage by a significant margin. For example, in 2002, Proposition 22 defined marriage as being between a man and a woman, and Field Polls underestimated the support for that proposition as well. Interestingly, this may be an artifact in the Field Polls only, as previous scholars have found little evidence of a “Gay Bradley Effect.” (Egan 2008)

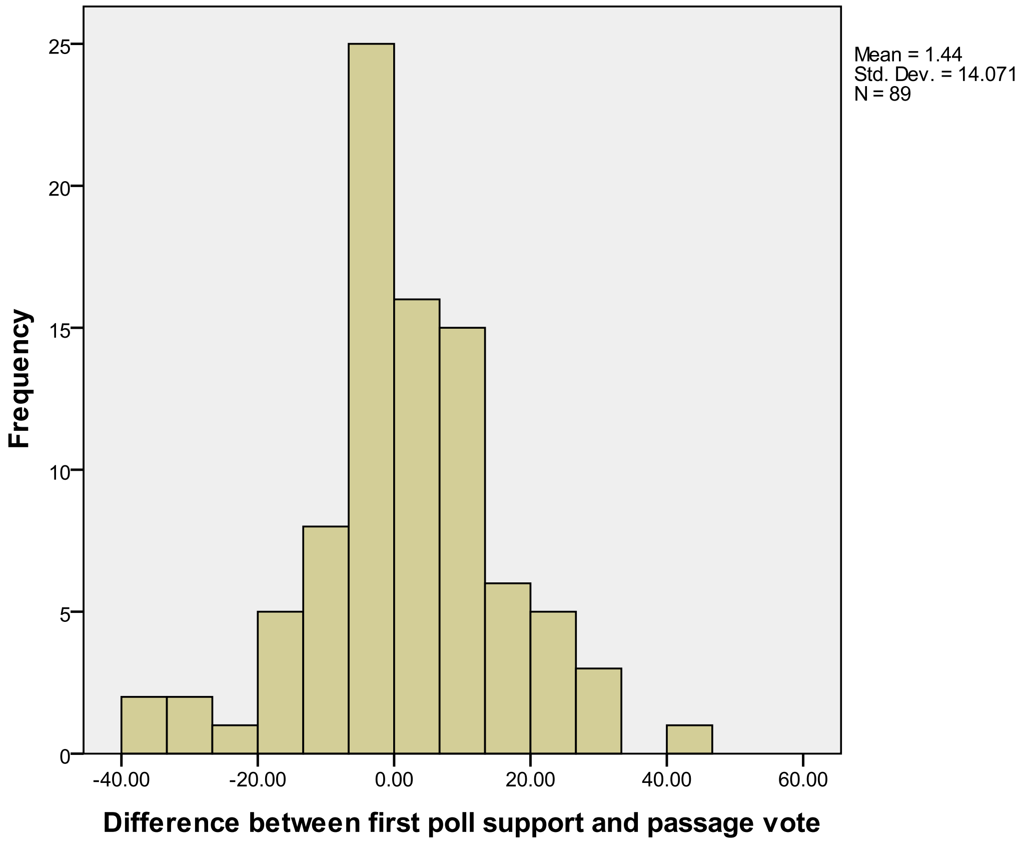
Proposition 57 represents the truest refutation of the conventional wisdom, in that voter opinion clearly shifted in its favor over the course of the campaign. Proposition 64 is a partial refutation, owing to the rather high levels of undecided voters (a theme to which we shall return shortly). Proposition 8 is a case where the polling appears to simply understate support for restrictions on gay marriage; the conventional wisdom is not really about polling biases on one issue, but propositions generally. And Proposition 21 was simply a case of a change in ballot language, so the poll was asking the wrong question. In sum, then, the conventional wisdom, given the benefit of the doubt, is quite accurate: 15 of 17 propositions that polled support lower than opposition went on to lose. On the other hand, the conventional wisdom as it’s commonly stated in the strong form is clearly overstated. Propositions that initially poll under 50% win quite commonly. Naturally, they don’t win as often as those that poll above 50%, but that simply means that voter preferences are relatively stable.

Does Opposition to Propositions Increase?

Another weak form of the conventional wisdom is that propositions that start behind won’t win because, in the face of competing (and often transparently misleading) advertisements from rival camps, voters will simply take the "safe" option of the status quo. As a first test of this, let us consider a few simple differences—those between the first poll and last polls, and between the first poll and the final vote tally.

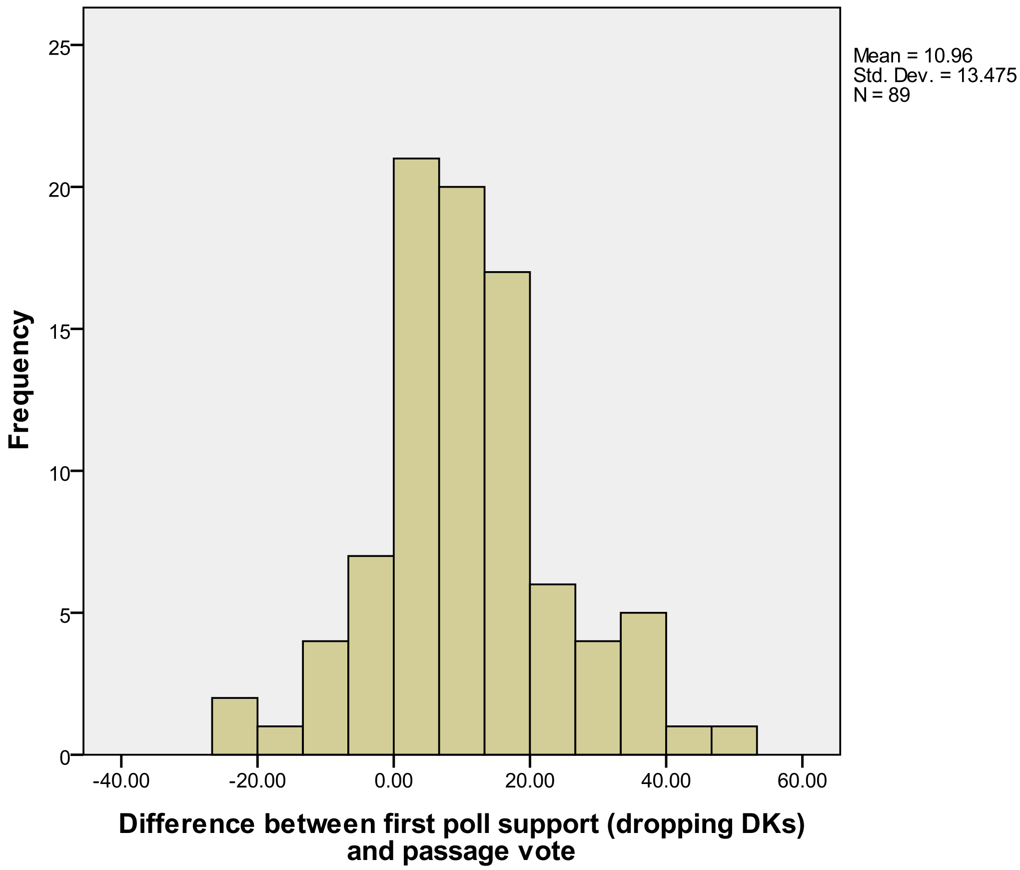
Figures 2 and 3 are histograms of the difference between the first poll and the final outcome. Figure 2 uses the raw measure of support in the first poll, whereas Figure 3 uses the measure after dropping the undecideds. The mean difference using the first measure is a scant 1.4 percentage points, a statistically insignificant difference for most cases. Note, however, the large concentration of polls that only slightly underestimated the final support. These are essentially accounted for by the allocation of some undecided voters either to the support tally, or removed from the pool of voters entirely (either by not showing up to vote as the likely voter screens thought they would or by "rolling off" and not casting a vote for that proposition). In fact, consider Figure 3, which ignores these undecided voters.

Figure 2 Histogram of the Difference Between First Poll Support and Final Vote



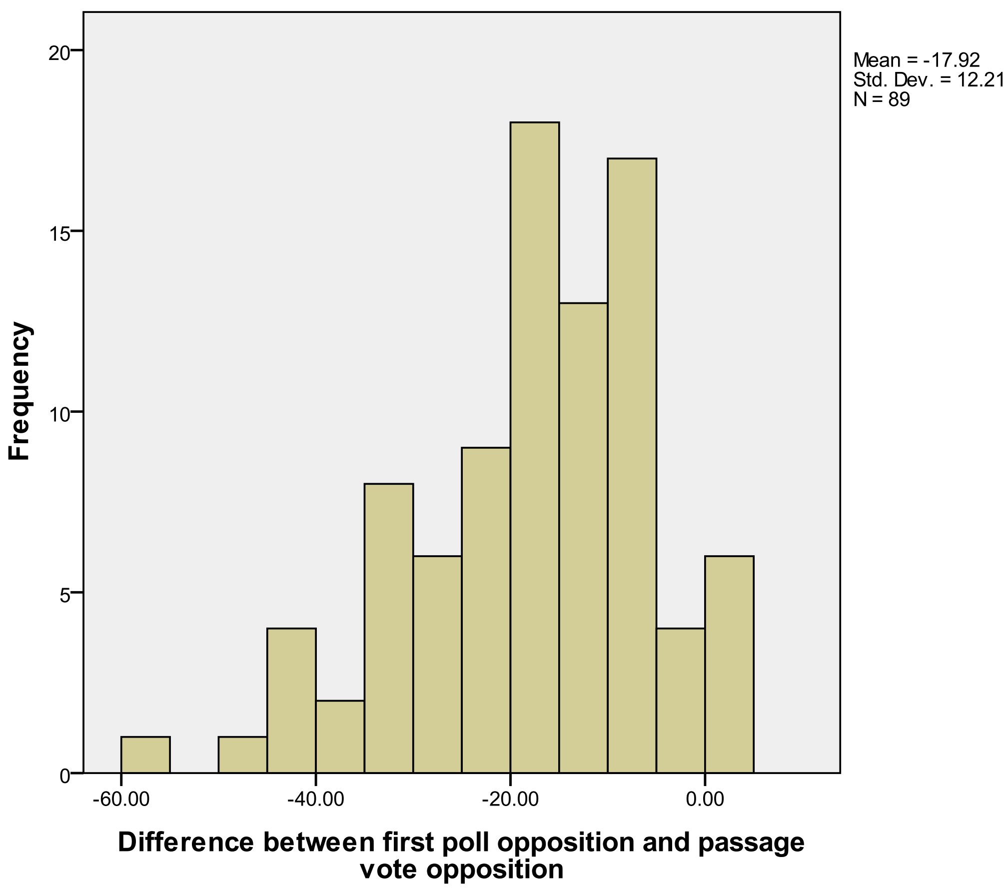
The histogram in Figure 3 is quite different, lending support to the conventional wisdom. Support in final passage is, on average, nearly 11 percentage points lower. This is still not a law, but a trend, as there are 14 propositions that did better than their initial polling, but usually not more than a few percentage points better. On the other hand, 17 propositions did more than 20 percentage points worse than the initial poll indicated. The evidence, then, is mixed. The initial polls can understate or overstate support by a large margin, but if we only consider those expressing an opinion, it seems like overstating, sometimes by quite large amounts, is much more common.

Figure 3 Histogram of the Difference Between First Poll Support (Dropping DKs) and Passage Vote



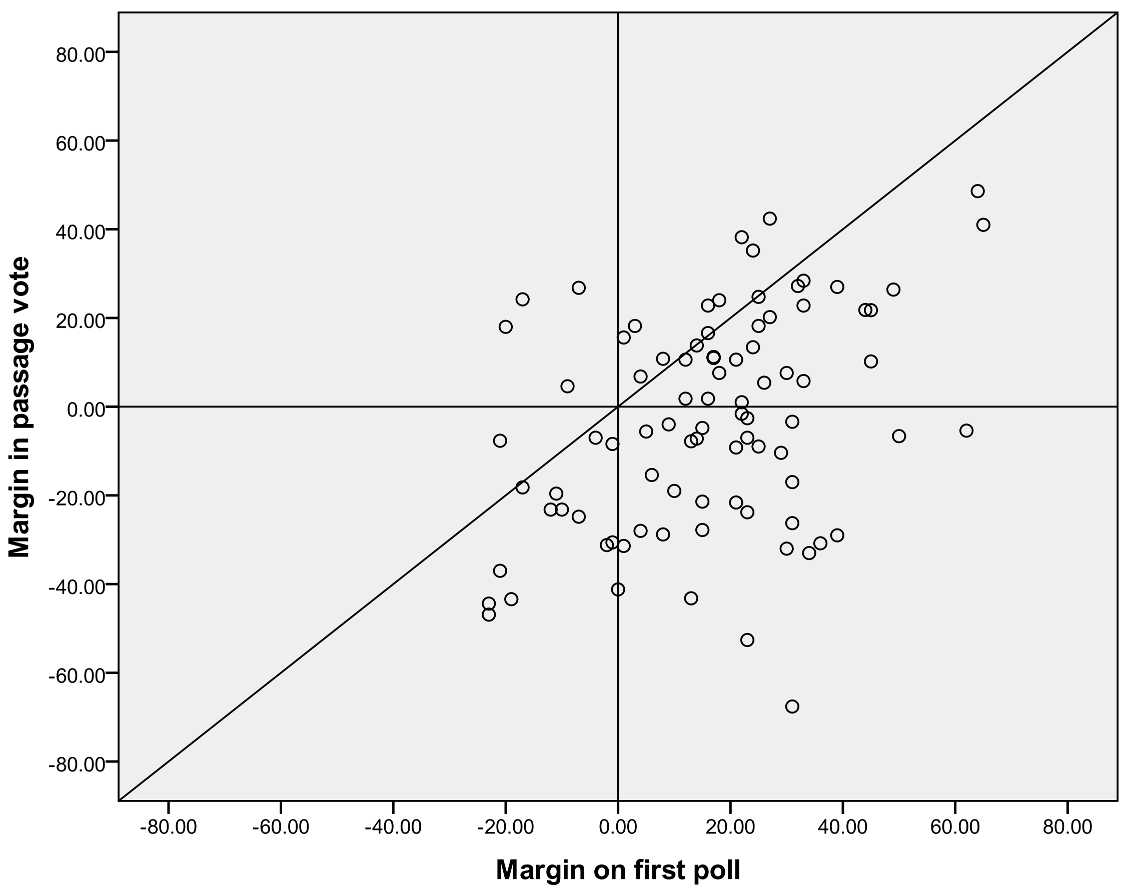
In truth, though, just dropping the undecided voters is only one way of looking at this question. Taken literally, an increase in opposition is not the same thing as a decrease in support. Figure 4 pursues this more literal interpretation. The mean difference between opposition in the first poll and the final vote is nearly 18 percentage points. Moreover, in every case but six, final opposition is higher than initial poll opposition. In those six cases, the differences are small, less than four percentage points. Naturally, a good portion of this is found in allocating the undecideds. There are no undecideds reported in vote totals, so, as noted earlier, those who were undecided in the poll either had to vote yes or no, not turnout, or abstain from voting on that proposition. But, compare Figure 4 to Figure 2. Simply comparing these two not-quite-identical numbers for support gave a distribution roughly centered on 0 for support, but decidedly centered towards negative numbers (or higher final totals) for opposition. So, while political observers might have been mistaking the disappearance of voters for increases in either side, their "disappearance" clearly ends up hurting passage. The conventional wisdom seems largely correct.

Figure 4 Difference in Opposition Between First Poll and Passage Vote



Histograms fail to tell the whole story, though, and only looking at support or opposition limits our vision too much. Let us consider both support and opposition together by looking at the margin between them. Figure 5 provides a clearer picture of this by plotting the margin in the first poll against the margin in the election results, and the picture is stark. The vast majority of points fall below the 45 degree line, meaning that margins of victory tend to shrink, and do so substantially. The average proposition loses nearly 20 points from that initial margin.[4]

Figure 5 Margins in First Poll Versus Passage Vote



[4] This seems like a larger number than it is. A proposition that initially polls ahead 52-48 and loses 48-52 has an 8 point drop by this measure, even though the final results are not far outside the margin of error of most polls.

However, let us revisit this question by asking what happens to opposition strictly within the context of the polling, to avoid the turnout and rolloff questions. Figure 6 shows the histogram for the differences in support between the first and last poll, whereas Figure 7 shows the differences in opposition.

Figure 6 Difference Between First Poll Support and Last Poll Support

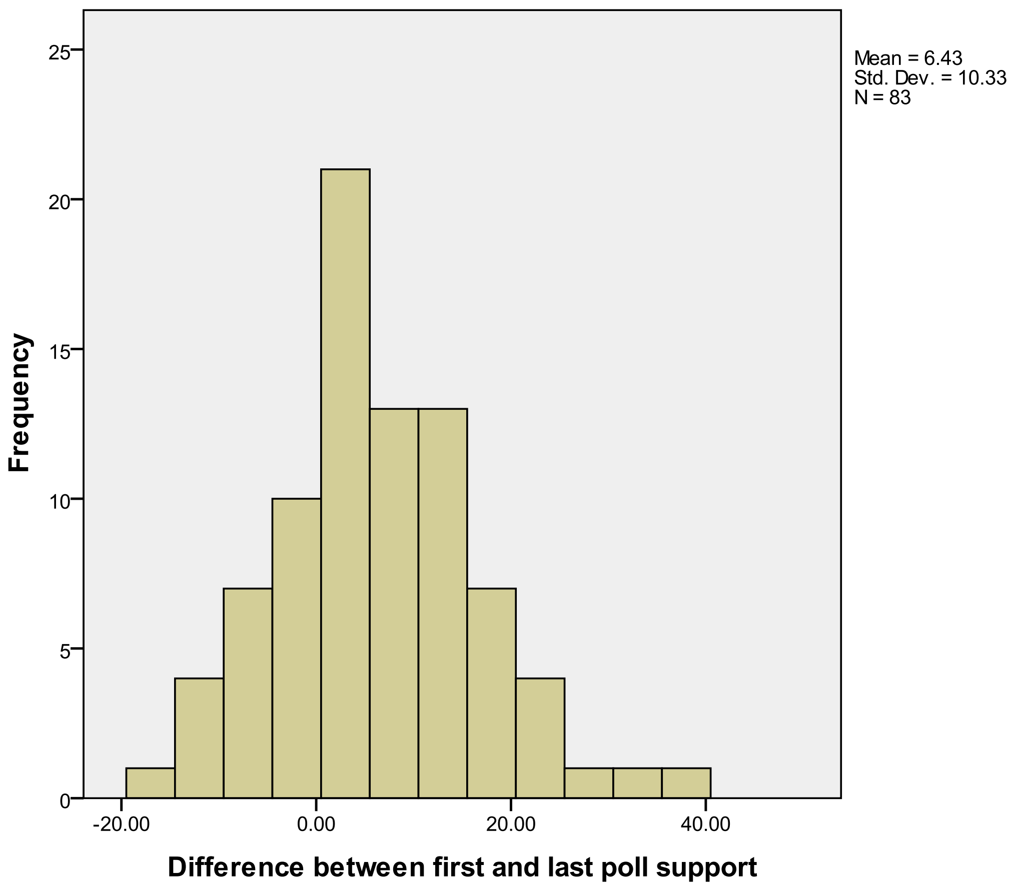
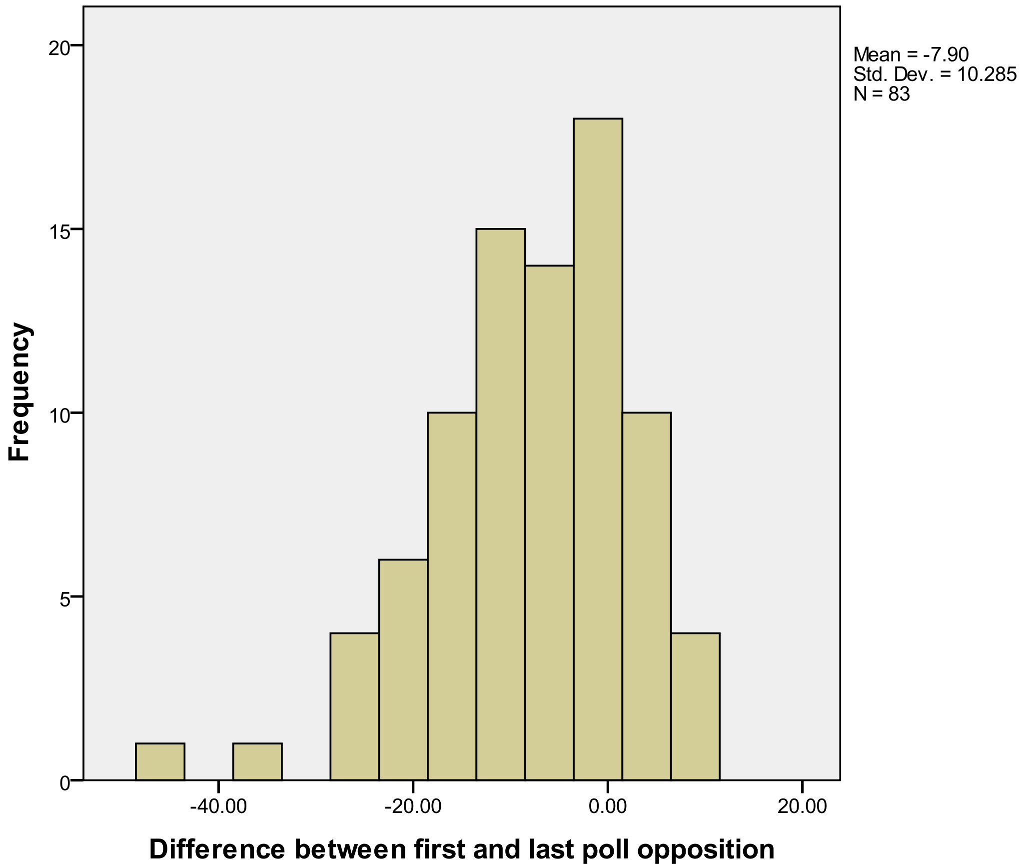


Figure 7 Difference Between First Poll Opposition and Final Poll Opposition



As Figures 6 and 7 make clear, support tends to ebb somewhat over the course of the campaign, whereas opposition almost always grows. Polling on 22 propositions showed no change or an increase in support over the campaign; 8 of those changes are statistically significant increases. On the other side, 37 of the 61 negative changes are statistically significant. 22[5] propositions showed no change or an increase in opposition; only 4 of those changes are statistically significant. Of the remaining 61 positive changes, 42 are statistically significant.

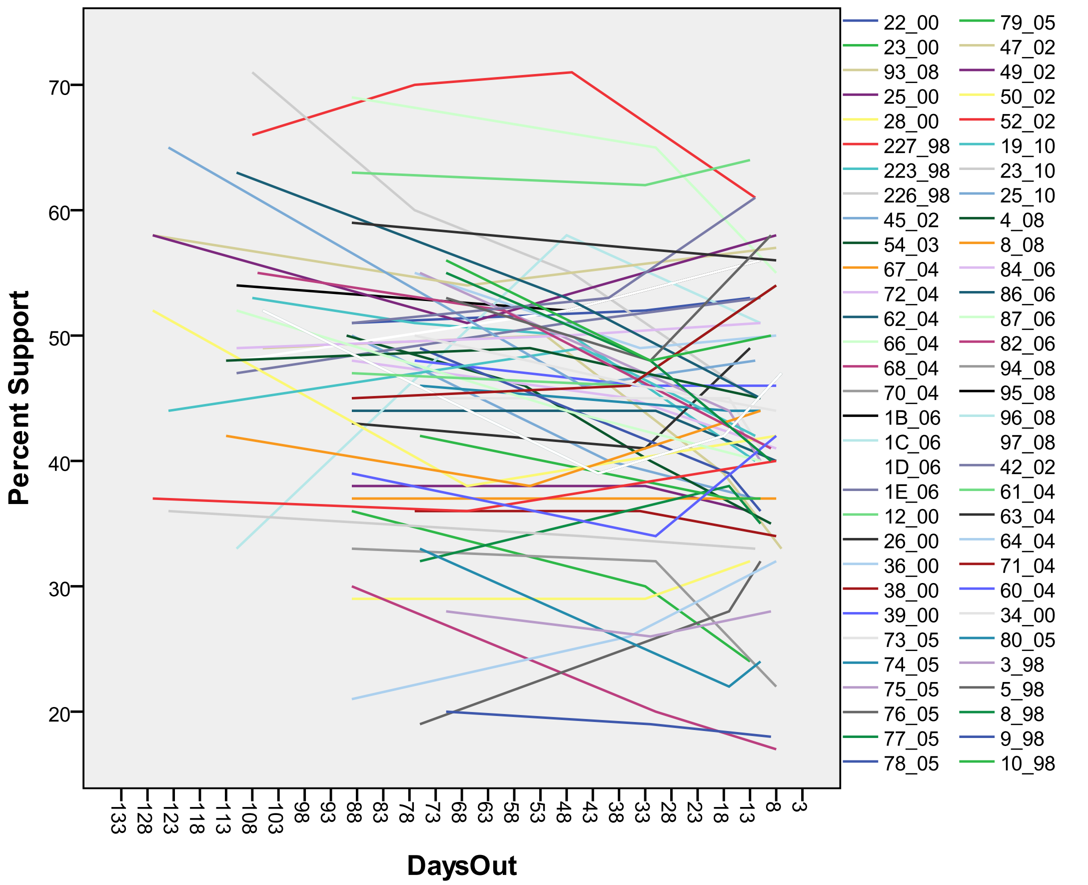
[5] The number is a coincidence, although most of those that have a decrease in opposition have an increase in support.

Thus, propositions tend to poll worse, no matter how we frame it, as the election nears. While not a rule, declines are much more common than increases. The margin between support and opposition only improved for 17 propositions. More significantly, coming back from being behind is fantastically rare. Only one proposition in the dataset made a statistically significant improvement in its polling when starting behind: Proposition 57 in 2004.

Evolution of Opinions Over Time

In light of this discussion, it should come as no surprise that polling on most propositions shows a downward trend of support over the course of the months prior to the election. However, consider the data presented in Figure 8. What is most interesting about this graph is the similarity of the declines in support. Once it gets within the last 3 months before an election, most propositions show slight, but consistent declines over time. However, there is a second pattern in these data. A reasonably large subset of propositions found that support increased between the second-to-last and final poll.

Figure 8 Support Over Time for Propositions With More Than Three Polls



The story for opposition (see Figure 9) looks much the same in reverse, with one important difference. Almost all propositions see an increase in opposition in the last poll. As with support, much of this is due to people who “didn’t know” making a decision as the election nears. This makes sense; campaigns have changed their minds, either through persuasion or simple queue-giving. However, before we consider proposition campaigns informative, consider Figure 10.[6] There is a sharp decrease in indecision between the penultimate and final polls. People are making up their minds, but it isn’t clear that this is due to campaigns. The reason is that there is a large increase in indecision from the first poll to the second, regardless of how far

[6] Note that the scales for Figures 8 & 9 versus Figure 10 differ significantly. Rather than scale down to drop out the earliest polls taken 4-6 months out, I have opted to keep those points in the graph to make a point about the difference between the first and second polls, as well as between the last and penultimate polls.

out the polls are taken! If we think about the way in which the Field Corporation decides to poll on a proposition (a combination of their own interests, their intuitions over what propositions will be interesting to clients, explicit requests from clients, and clients subsidizing some polls), then we might interpret the length of time that propositions are polled on to depend on how "sensational" or "sexy" an issue is. What is odd, then, is that the increase in indecision doesn't seem to have anything to do with how far out that first poll is. Proposition campaigns rarely begin in earnest 150 days before an election. This increase in indecision is still, then, odd.

Figure 9 Opposition Over Time for Propositions with More Than Three Polls

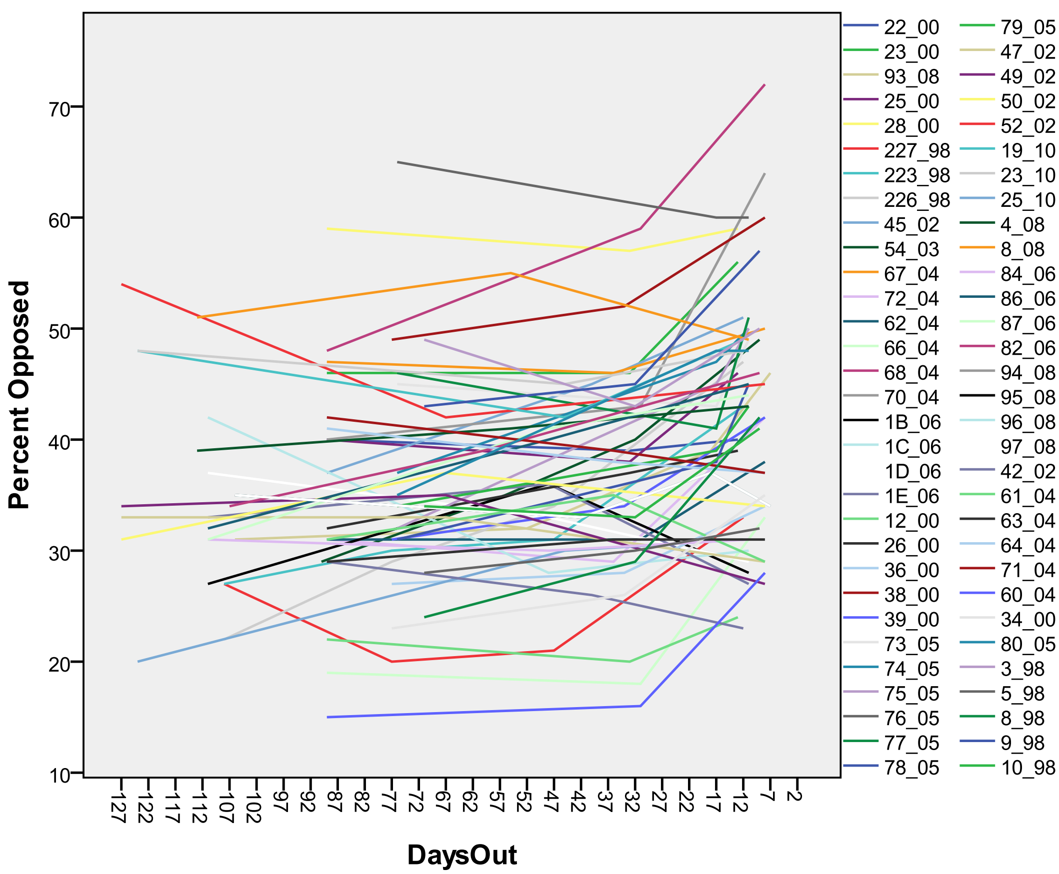
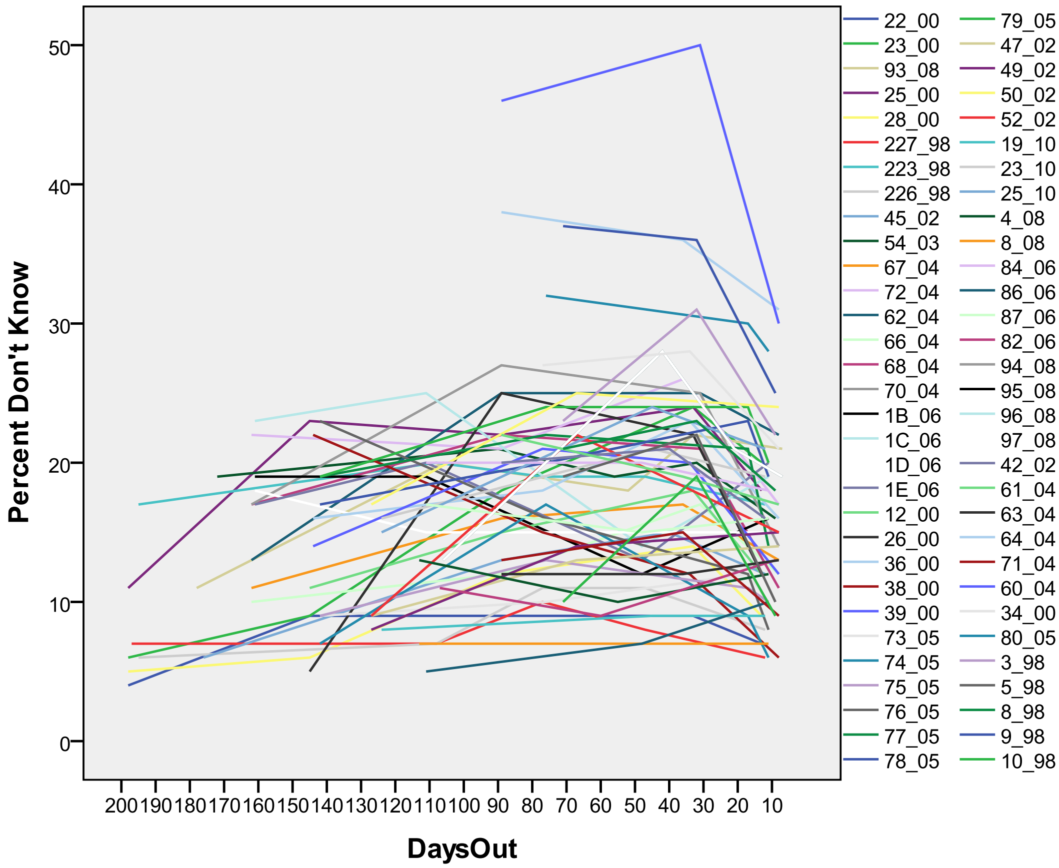


Figure 10 "Don't Know" Over Time for Propositions with More Than Three Polls



WHO Changes Their Minds?

Thus far, we have seen that the biggest changes early in the life of a proposition are usually increases in indecision, as respondents come to hear something about the propositions that makes them unsure. However, by and large, opinions don't change much until that last month before the election, when indecision drops significantly, with more of those becoming opposed than supporting. But, *who* is changing their minds across propositions generally? It is to this question that we now turn.

Data

The data employed to answer this question deserve some elucidation, as they are quite a bit more complex than the data so far analyzed. For this research, I collected every poll conducted by the Field Corporation, a history of some 250 polls conducted since 1947. While these files are all relatively easy to access (for researchers at CSUs or UCs, which support the Field Poll and are granted access to the data in return), comparing them is not. Given the sheer scope of the enterprise, consistent measures of independent and dependent variables are needed. For the dependent variable, this required reading the initial press reports and using the variable descriptions in each file.[7] However, independent variables pose some problems. Consistent wording has been used for many demographic variables, such as gender, educational achievement, and age. Three other variables, however, are not so consistent.

Race has been consistently asked since approximately 1970 in the Field Polls, with 5 possible responses: white, black, latino, asian, and other. Prior to 1970, the question was asked as white vs nonwhite, or white, black and other. Thus, for our purposes here, "other" is being used as the residual category, and our estimate of racial effects prior to 1970 are somewhat more suspect. Income has been somewhat consistently asked, but it was left out of some polls for unknown reasons. Seventeen datasets would have had to be dropped from the analysis for a lack of the income variable (which has been recoded into income quintiles, to make results comparable over time); future analyses will include an income variable, but the variable was dropped for the analyses for the current iteration.

[7] Field Polls have appeal for the reason of their largely consistent (and superior) methodology for asking about proposition support. Field reads respondents the brief ballot language description that will appear on the ballot, thus approximating the actual decision environment voters will face, as most claim to use the sample ballots when they vote.

However, the most problematic variable was partisanship. Given Field's sampling interests (and recent sampling methodology, which is to use voter registration data to provide phone numbers to sample from), they have asked both a partisan identification and partisan registration question over the years, with no one question dominant for any significant period of time. Thus, a quandary is presented. In cases where both party identification and registration were available, party identification was used. In cases with only one variable available, all those registered as anything but Democrat or Republican were treated as "independents" (the base category), which is the treatment of the party identification variable. Thus, we are treating our measures as being consistent measures of party identification, when there is actually some imputation in some datasets. [8]

In total, there are 114 separate datasets, yielding a total of 388 different regressions (as multiple propositions are polled in most datasets, with a range from 1-10 in any given dataset) based on a collection of 179 propositions, ranging from 1958 to 2007.[9]

Method

If I have to admit my data are not completely polished, the same goes doubly so for the analysis—or, more properly, *analyses*—as the analysis in this section is actually a meta-analysis of the 388 regressions mentioned above. In the first stage, 388 OLS regressions were run of support for propositions on age, gender, education level, racial dummy variables, and party dummy variables. Doing so involves a conscious tradeoff. OLS estimates are directly

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[8] 75% of respondents are registered with the party they identify with, with the largest other category being "unregistered." Since these respondents are very likely to filter themselves out of the analyses on the dependent variable (because Field is only interested in models of registered and likely voters), it was felt that errors in this way would "self-censor" themselves out of the data.

[9] Data from 2008 to 2012 is available, but recoding the independent variables to be consistent across all datasets did not get through these files at the time this version of the paper was completed.

comparable to each other in this manner, as each is a consistent prediction, rather than a contingent one (as would be the case for a logit or other non-linear coefficient). However, a linear probability model is statistically inappropriate. For example, predicted values for relatively common values (for example, a white male Democrat in his thirties with a bachelor's degree) are outside the possible range in 22 of the 388 cases (all of them are negative probabily projections). 16 of these 22 are in cases with "unasked" racial categories, leading one to suspect some specification error (above and beyond the obvious one of a nonlinear relationship!)

What follows, then, is a discussion of regression coefficients and predicted values taken out of context. A linear probability model is generally not the absolute worst model; the OLS estimator is remarkably robust to many specification errors, and, as noted above, predictions are usually within the range of possible outcomes. However, in the future, analyses that are much more statistically valid are called for.[10]

Findings

There are two ways to look at the results. The first focuses on the averages across the polls, ignoring differences in when they occurred (or, alternatively, holding that constant). The second looks for consistent variation across time or polling iterations. Let us turn our attention to the first question.

Are There "Yes Men" (or Women?)

Table 5 presents summary statistics for the coefficients for the variables utilized across all specifications. One observation is immediately striking: there is a great deal of variation from

[10] The biggest problem with the current OLS approach is the treatment of undecideds, who were simply labeled as missing data. Ideally, a multinomial logit approach and a comparison of predicted values will be done.

poll to poll. All of the coefficients take on positive and negative values, and their means are all relatively close to zero. Standard hypothesis testing is invalid for these statistics; later work will likely confirm what simple visual analysis suggests.

Table 5 Summary Statistics for OLS Coefficients Across All Models

Variable	Coeffcient			N	Standard
	Maximum	Minimum	Mean		Deviation
Age	0.140	-0.117	-0.013	388	.033
Gender	0.188	-0.350	-0.046	388	.094
Education Level	0.133	-0.116	-0.001	388	.041
White	0.776	-0.670	0.056	388	.176
Black	1.057	-0.768	0.071	388	.232
Latino	0.773	-0.744	0.075	366	.202
Asian	0.963	-1.159	0.081	366	.250
Dem	0.496	-0.584	0.020	387	.124
Rep	0.460	-0.389	0.014	383	.150
Constant	-1.341	1.307	-0.478	388	.372

Cell entries are statistics for coefficients from regressions as specified in the text.

This approach treats all models the same, including counting those propositions polled multiple times every time they were polled on. If we restrict our data to the initial poll on each proposition, the picture does not change substantially.[11] Indeed, if the question is "are there substantial differences by demographics in people's willingness to support propositions," the answer would appear to be "no." On *average*, women are less supportive than men, the older are less supportive than the young, education has no effect, the base racial category of "other" is less supportive, and independents are slightly less supportive of propositions than are their

[11] There is one caveat to this; the partisanship effects have slightly narrow ranges. This could demonstrate that a few of the multiply-polled upon propositions activated partisanship during their campaigns, increasing the range of observed effects. However, this is a questionable assumption, as the relationship between the two partisan dummy variable coefficients is generally positive, and even more so amongst the most-polled upon propositions, indicating that the base category, independents, is actually the one behaving more systematically. This notion will be expanded upon more in the text.

counterparts. But these effects are inconsistent across models. Histograms of the T-statistics for each coefficient are normal, suggesting further that these moderate effects are real (and small).

Who Changes Their Minds?

For these purposes, we need to restrict our sample to those propositions with multiple polls. As very few propositions were polled on 4 or 5 times, in practice, this means those propositions with two or three polls taken on them. At this point, comparing 10 regression coefficients over two or three time points becomes confusing, particularly if most of the movement is taking place in the constant (e.g., across all respondents). Thus, for the sake of comparison, Table 6 presents predicted probabilities for 8 different types of respondents, varying them on a number of characteristics.

Table 6 Predicted Probabilities of Supporting a Proposition At Different Polling Instances

	Propositions with 2 Polls		**Propositions with 3 Polls**			**Differences**		
Type of Person	**1 of 2**	**2 of 2**	**1 of 3**	**2 of 3**	**3 of 3**	**(2-1)**	**(3-1)**	**(3-2)**
Days to Election	76	15	93	36	11	---	---	---
WM30sDHS	47.2%	42.8%	51.9%	47.0%	34.3%	4.4%	17.6%	12.7%
WM30sDBA	46.2%	42.4%	49.8%	46.9%	36.2%	3.8%	13.5%	10.7%
WM50sDHS	42.8%	40.6%	49.7%	43.9%	32.0%	2.1%	17.7%	11.9%
BM30sDHS	51.4%	42.4%	48.4%	48.7%	36.5%	8.9%	11.9%	12.2%
LM30sDHS	53.4%	46.6%	54.1%	49.5%	34.4%	6.9%	19.7%	15.1%
WM30sRHS	43.1%	42.5%	51.3%	47.7%	33.9%	0.6%	17.5%	13.8%
WF30sDHS	42.3%	37.2%	47.6%	41.3%	29.4%	5.1%	18.2%	11.9%
WM30sD<8	51.6%	45.0%	54.0%	50.0%	36.5%	6.6%	17.5%	13.5%
WM30sIHS	43.6%	40.3%	49.9%	47.1%	32.0%	3.4%	18.0%	15.2%

NOTE: Characteristics are in the following order: Race, Gender, Age, Party, Education
Abbreviations are as follows: **W**-white, **B-**black, **L**-latino, **M**-male, **F-**female, **30s-**30-39 years old, **50s-**50-59 years old, **D-**Democrat, **R-**Republican, **I-**independent, **HS-**high school, **BA-**college, **<8**-less than an 8th grade education

The relative paucity of inclination to support can be seen by comparing the numbers in each column, particularly in the first column for each group of polls (1 of 2 and 1 of 3). Differences there are relatively minor, and as we saw above, are quite possibly random errors. As noted above, women are less supportive than men, older are less supportive than younger, education is associated with less support, independents are less supportive and racial effects are inconsistent (whites are noticeably less supportive than blacks or Latinos in the first of two polls, but the order changes for the first of three polls).

To see the effects of campaigns, consider the difference columns. In the propositions with only two polls taken, which are likely less contested propositions, differences are relatively small, on the order of approximately 5 points, with little variation. However, in the more-contested propositions (those with three polls taken), there are much larger differences between first and last polls taken. Moreover, those differences are mostly made up of opinion changes in the last month of the campaign. In a little over three weeks, on average, support for propositions (amongst those having opinions) drops 10-15 percentage points. As we saw earlier, a lot of this is likely due to those with no opinions coming to have opinions, and those are more negative than positive. Those with more education are very slightly less reactive, as they likely had firmer opinions to begin with, but this difference is minor. Latinos and independents have the largest opinion changes, which fits for those with fewer fixed elite signals to start with.

Conclusions

Put plainly, proposition campaigns (for it is in this last month that proposition campaigns truly begin) seem to have an effect—a negative one. The more polled-upon propositions have more opinion change than do the less interesting ones. Those are also the propositions most likely to have the most vigorous campaigns. Note that the number of days until the election is not correlated with the drop in support; the number of polls taken is. Most (contested) propositions start out right around 50% support. In most cases, proposition campaigns seem to elicit a “pox on both your houses” mentality. This happens across the public, with only minor variations in places where we might have expected larger ones.

At least, that is what these data seem to indicate. This analysis is incomplete. Inferences based on the number of polls taken as a proxy for campaign activity are not very solid; for example, if only one proposition is truly being contested, other propositions may have had their polling “come along for the ride.” The data are missing some observations from more recent and older data; they are centered on the 1970-2007 period. The use of OLS instead of a more-nuanced multinomial logit approach made meta-analysis easier, but is difficult to defend statistically.

Future Directions

Further exploration of what exactly these patterns show is necessary. The natural expectation when support goes down and indecision goes up is that supporters became undecided, but it’s possible that opponents became undecided and some supporters became opponents. When the margins shift, that could be moderated through the undecideds, or could simply represent movement amongst those who insist on being decided.

Continuing with moving this project into a more explanatory phase, a number of potential explanations for why these patterns exist could be explored. The most obvious of these are campaign expenditures, media or other endorsements, and the nature of the issues at hand. For example, do “hard” and “easy” issues move differently? (Carmines and Stimson 1980) However, those are just some of the questions at the aggregate level. At the individual level, we don’t seem to have found many consistent effects, but there could be interactive (including cross-level interactive) effects.

References

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