

A NEW FRONTIER IN POLLING

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On October 6, one day before the California recall election, the Hoover Office of Public Affairs issued its third and final press release summarizing the results of the third wave of the Stanford-Hoover-Knowledge Networks (hereafter S-H-KN) Internet Poll. The press release reported that support for recalling Governor Gray Davis had stayed nearly constant for a month and now stood at just under 60 percent, and that despite the groping revelations published in the *Los Angeles Times* Arnold Schwarzenegger had consolidated his lead as the campaign entered its final hours. Interest in the S-H-KN poll had been building throughout September, and as the latest (and last) poll to report, media interest was high. Some 812 radio broadcasts reaching an estimated audience of 12,670,000 reported on the press release and a KN vice-president defended the poll against a Davis Campaign operative on Fox' *The O'Reilly Factor*.

The involvement of the Hoover Institution in polling began innocently enough. In late August Hoover Senior Fellows and Political Science Professors David Brady and Morris Fiorina were chatting with the chairman of the Stanford Communications Department, Shanto Iyengar, about the problems with polling in a complicated election like the recall. At the time it was not universally known that there were two stages to the election, and it was not widely appreciated that people could vote against the recall and

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still vote for a replacement candidate. Moreover, with 135 candidates on the ballot, votes surely would be contingent on strategic calculations. Would Republicans abandon more conservative candidates like Tom McClintock and Bill Simon to support a more electable moderate like Peter Ueberroth or Arnold Schwarzenegger? Would Democrats desert a more liberal candidate like Cruz Bustamante and support Davis if a Republican appeared to be ahead? Would even Republicans vote to keep Davis if they thought that a more liberal Democrat like Bustamante would win? How could pollsters sort through such complications over the telephone? Could one place any trust in the poll results being reported?

It occurred to us that this was an ideal situation for Knowledge Networks (hereafter KN), an Internet polling firm founded by Stanford Political Scientists Norman Nie and Douglas Rivers in 1998 (<http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp>). Survey researchers know that the days of telephone surveying are numbered. Too many people simply will not answer the phone and then consent to an interview anymore. Consequently, response rates have fallen dangerously low—below 20 percent in many cases. The Internet is the obvious next step in polling—large numbers of people can be reached quickly and cheaply over the net. The problem lies in getting a representative sample. Almost half the population still is not wired, and for those who are, random digit dialing does not apply and there is no comprehensive directory of email addresses from which a sample can be chosen. Thus, survey researchers have been unable to rely on the scientific sampling methods normally used in telephone surveying (and face-to-face interviewing before that).

The dangers in relying on samples of Internet “volunteers” (as some firms do) were amusingly illustrated by a poll carried on the Democratic National Committee website during the 2000 campaign. The question of the week read as follows:

As the nation approaches a new millennium, what are the most important priorities facing our next president?"

- 1. Saving Social Security, strengthening Medicare, and paying down the debt*
- 2. Implementing George W. Bush's \$1.7 trillion risky tax scheme that overwhelmingly benefits the wealthy*

At the end of the week the DNC was embarrassed to report that the risky tax scheme that overwhelmingly benefited the wealthy was ahead by 72 percent to 22 percent. Mischievous Republicans had hijacked the poll.

Nie and Rivers reasoned that the solution to this problem was simple: money. Draw the sample first, then, approach those who were selected. If they were not wired, buy them the necessary equipment and teach them how to use it. Pay for the Internet connection of everyone who agreed to participate in the poll. After an initial \$6 million demonstration that was highly successful, venture capitalists have since invested an additional \$100 million dollars in Knowledge Networks. The KN panel currently includes 35,000 Americans, 4,000 of them in California. Portions of the sample are rotated out quarterly and replaced by fresh people.

Why such a large sample? For the same reason that investors were willing to put \$100 million into the enterprise—not to do better political science, but to do profitable market research. With its large representative samples KN can track scotch drinkers, luxury car buyers, whatever. But so can any other market research firm if given enough money to query a large number of people. What makes KN uniquely qualified for political polling is that (1) each respondent's background data and previous survey responses are stored in the KN database for attachment to future surveys, and even more importantly, (2) the visual capacity of the Internet enables KN to do far more creative and compelling research. For example, KN can ask respondents to view a

commercial and measure respondents' reactions directly, rather than ask them over the telephone if they recall seeing an ad, then asking them to evaluate it if they have.

Back to our story. We were most interested in the visual capability of KN. We wanted to put a facsimile of the California ballot before the voters and thus reproduce the set of choices they would face in the voting booth. We approached KN with our proposal and they offered to include our experiment on an early September poll for a modest price that we covered by pooling various Stanford and Hoover research funds. Not only did potential respondents receive a copy of the actual ballot, KN even rotated the list of replacement candidates in the same manner as the California Secretary of State did for each county.

The first wave of our poll was overshadowed by two well-known polls that reported on the state of the race as of early September (Table 1). First, Field reported that the recall was leading by a comfortable margin of 55-40. A few days later, however, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the race was much closer: only a three point margin separated the yes and no sides. The two polling giants engaged in a rare public tiff. The *LA Times* suggested that considering normal sampling error, if the Field figures were a few points too high and the *Times* figures a few points too low, they were consistent. Field retorted that relative to recent California elections the *Times* sample had too many minority voters and thus had overestimated sentiment for keeping Davis.

The first wave of the S-H-KN poll overlapped the Field and *Times* polls and reported results closer to Field's, but with even stronger support (62 %) for the recall. Our higher figure could be explained by two considerations. First, Field and the *Times* were reporting figures for likely voters whereas we were reporting for all registered voters (we were operating on a shoestring and had not paid for any items that could let us identify a smaller sample of likely voters). It had already become apparent from numerous polls that people who were more marginal politically favored the recall more

than did habitual voters, so our less-refined sample naturally reflected this higher level of support.

In addition, we had unintentionally happened on a way to thin out the ranks of the undecideds. Field had 5 % in that category whereas we had only 3 people among more than 500 registered voters who did not click either yes or no on the recall question. Faced with a choice, people made a decision. We suspected that the undecideds were leaning toward recalling Davis, a suspicion that soon became much stronger.

Both Field and the *LA Times* agreed that Cruz Bustamante led Arnold Schwarzenegger by about 5 points (Field did not say why Bustamante's lead in the *Times* was not greater if the *Times* sample included a disproportionate number of minorities). S-H-KN reported a completely different result, however: Schwarzenegger led Bustamante by 12 points among all registered voters. (Table 2)

Some of our Hoover colleagues who were working on the Schwarzenegger campaign were buoyed by this poll—the only reputable poll at the time that showed Schwarzenegger ahead. We were somewhat concerned by this poll—the only reputable poll at the time that showed Schwarzenegger ahead. Nevertheless, we strongly believed that our methodology was superior to that used in the telephone polls. Moreover, the undecideds loomed very large when comparing our data to that from the telephone polls.

Field and *LA Times* reported that the undecideds numbered in the high teens. This was typical of polls reported at the time. In contrast, S-H-KN reported none: the actual ballot does not include a box for “undecided.” People could decline to mark the ballot, of course, but only six people did. In addition, after the 135 replacement candidate names there was a 136th category on the ballot labeled “other” which is meant for write-ins, but which could be utilized by undecideds. Six percent of the S-H-KN sample chose “other,” with about 2/3 of these consisting of people who voted no on the recall. Even if

we assume that all of that 6 percent consisted of people who would have fallen into the undecided category in the Field or *LA Times* poll--surely too strong an assumption--that leaves 10-12 percent who registered a choice in the S-H-KN poll who did not choose in the other polls.

We now suspected that telephone polls were picking up what social scientists call a social desirability effect: a significant number of people were reluctant to admit to an interviewer that they intended to vote for a candidate widely portrayed in the media as a B-movie actor with no government experience and few apparent qualifications. Some of these people lied and said that they were voting for someone else, while others, probably most, said they were undecided. But in the privacy of their own homes such voters could click on Arnold Schwarzenegger and then hit "send" and only a far-away computer would know--a condition of anonymity similar to what they would encounter in the voting booth and quite different from announcing their vote to someone over the telephone. Thus, our first press release did not back off the finding that Schwarzenegger was ahead, but suggested instead that the undecided vote in the other polls would disproportionately break for him.

On September 15 a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals postponed the election. We had already sent a second wave questionnaire into the field, however, so we continued to gather data while the election was in limbo. The report on our second wave came out during a slow news time and garnered a bit more interest. The second wave figures (Table 3) were almost identical to those in the first wave (in parentheses). Six in ten registered California voters continued to favor recalling Davis, while Arnold Schwarzenegger led Cruz Bustamante by 9 points, a slightly smaller margin than in the first wave. Schwarzenegger had not lost any ground-- his support still stood at about 40 percent, but Bustamante had gained a bit, mostly as a result of Latinos now breaking heavily for him whereas they had split more evenly earlier. The only other poll released

during this period was a Public Policy Institute of California poll that showed results more similar to the earlier Field and *LA Times* polls than to the contemporaneous S-H-KN poll: the recall led narrowly, and Schwarzenegger had closed the gap with Bustamante, but still trailed. Importantly, PPIC reported 18 percent still undecided.

On September 23, an 11-judge panel of the Court said the election would occur on schedule, and on September 24 the candidates debated. The consensus view was that McClintock had been the most impressive, Schwarzenegger had been adequate, Bustamante had been disappointing, and Arianna Huffington had stolen the show, although not to her advantage. Three major telephone polls reported in the wake of the debates. (Table 4) First a Gallup Poll conducted for CNN/USA TODAY reported that the election was all but over: yes on recall led no by more than 20 percent and Bustamante trailed Schwarzenegger by 15. This poll met with some skepticism although it was enough to cause consternation in the Davis and Bustamante camps. A few days later the *LA Times* reported that the races were closer, but the recall definitely was ahead and Schwarzenegger did have a significant lead (8 points) over Bustamante. A few days later Field agreed, but found lower levels of support for both Schwarzenegger and Bustamante (and a higher level of undecideds—13 percent, contrasting with 4 percent undecideds and 5 percent none of the above in the *Times* poll). The prevailing interpretation was that Schwarzenegger had done well enough in the debate that voters were now willing to vote for him. Our interpretation was more subtle: Schwarzenegger had done well enough that voters were now willing *to admit* that they were going to vote for him. The third wave of the S-H-KN poll, now up to some 700 likely voters, found essentially the same level of support for the recall as in the two earlier waves, and a lead for Schwarzenegger (13 points) that was the same as in the first early September wave (12 points).

As Table 4 shows, compared to the actual election results, Gallup understated Schwarzenegger's margin by only two points but overstated support for the recall by 8 points. Field, and *LA Times* were very close to the recall vote, but significantly underestimated the margin between Schwarzenegger and Bustamante. S-H-KN slightly overestimated the recall vote but came closer to getting the Schwarzenegger's margin of victory. Moreover, S-H-KN was still in the field for 3-7 days after the other polls, and our late respondents foreshadowed the surge to Schwarzenegger over the final days of the campaign.

The *LA Times* published its groping allegations on Thursday morning, October 2. The third wave of the S-H-KN poll was still open so we continued to collect data to the last possible moment. On Sunday afternoon less than two days before the election, we eagerly examined the late arriving data and contrasted it to the earlier responses (Table 5). Among the 170 likely voters who responded after publication of the groping allegations, support for Schwarzenegger actually was marginally *higher* than among those interviewed earlier. Moreover—and, remarkably--further examination showed that the higher figure was entirely the result of a surge to Schwarzenegger among *women*. His support was 7 points higher among women who responded after the allegations broke than among those who responded earlier; men showed no difference whatsoever. 170 people is not a large subsample (although many poll interpretations rely on subsamples this small or smaller), so we were not confident about the data. In the press release we only offered the cautious observation that there was no indication the groping allegations had seriously damaged Schwarzenegger.

As it turned out the election results confirmed that a surge to Schwarzenegger was in progress during the final days of the campaign. And the exit polls confirmed the S-H-KN finding that the surge primarily occurred among women. What had been a

double-digit gender gap closed up by election day: the 6-point gap in the exit poll was virtually the same as the 5 point gap among the 170 late respondents in the S-H-KN poll.

Two final observations. First, all the polls overstated the final margin by which the recall passed. There is a perfectly logical reason for this. As Election Day drew near, both the polls and more impressionistic reporting indicated that Bustamante's campaign was dead in the water and Schwarzenegger was surging. Thus, the only way for Schwarzenegger's opponents to forestall his victory was to vote against the recall. Not enough of them did. That is our second observation. In the third wave of the S-H-KN poll 4 percent of the respondents voted yes on the recall and for Bustamante. Given the normal margin of error surrounding these figures, had all Bustamante supporters instead followed the public Democratic strategy of no on recall / yes on Bustamante, and all else remained constant (admittedly a strong assumption), it might have been just enough to save Davis.

All in all the S-H-KN experiment with Internet political polling is highly encouraging. In the end a far cheaper method of data collection performed at least as well as the more traditional and more expensive telephone polls, and earlier in the campaign we suspect that the new method did a better job of portraying the true shape of the political landscape. Thus encouraged, during the next year we will be conducting further S-H-KN Internet polls and reporting on the success of the new governor in dealing with the difficult problems and challenges he has inherited as well as the evolving political situation in California.

Table 1. *First Take: Recall Davis?*

	Field 9/3 - 7	LAT 9/6 -10	S-H-KN 8/29 - 9/8
Yes	55%	50%	62%
No	40	47	38
Undecided	5	3	--

LAT and Field Polls: Likely Voters

S-H-KN: Registered Voters

Table 2. *First Take: Who Replaces Davis?*

	Field 9/3 - 7	LAT 9/6 -10	S-H-KN 8/29 - 9/8
Bustamante	32%	30%	28%
Schwarznegger	27	25	40
McClintock	14	13	8
Others	9	14	23
Undecided	18	16	--

Table 3. *Interlude*

	S-H-KN		PPIC
	9/11 – 21		9/9 – 17
Recall Davis	61%	(62)	53
Schwarznegger	41	(41)	26
Bustamante	32	(28)	28
McClintock	11	(8)	14
Undecided	--	--	18

Table 4. *Down the Stretch*

	Recall	Arnold	Cruz
CNN/USA Today (Gallup 9/25 – 27)	63%	40%	25%
LA Times (9/25 – 29)	56	40	32
Field (9/29 – 10/1)	57	36	26
S-H-KN (9/26 – 10/4)	59	43	30
Election	55	49	32

Table 5. Coda- *Los Angeles Times* Revelations: 10/2

	Pre-LAT	Post-LAT
Schwarznegger	43%	46%
Bustamante	30	30
Schwarznegger		
Men	49	49
Women	37	44