

PART ELEVEN

THE RED SHIFT: ANOMALIES IN ELECTRONIC VOTING TREND OVERWHELMINGLY IN ONE DIRECTION



Veteran pollsters, independent statisticians, and experts specializing in election forensics have compared decades of computerized voting results with exit polls, tracking polls, and hand counts. Their findings show that when disparities occur, they benefit right-wing candidates and issues far more frequently. PHOTO: Denise Cross Photography (CC).

The statistically anomalous shifting of votes to the conservative right has become so pervasive in post-HAVA America that it now has a name of its own. Experts call it the “red shift.”

The Election Defense Alliance (EDA) is a nonprofit organization specializing in election forensics—a kind of dusting for the fingerprints of electronic theft. It is joined in this work by a coalition of independent statisticians, who have compared decades of computer-vote results to exit polls, tracking polls, and hand counts. Their findings show that when disparities occur, they benefit Republicans and right-wing issues far beyond the bounds of probability.

“We approach electoral integrity with a nonpartisan goal of transparency,” says EDA executive director Jonathan Simon.

“But there is nothing nonpartisan about the patterns we keep finding.” Simon’s verdict is confirmed by David Moore, a former vice president and managing editor of Gallup: “What the exit polls have consistently shown is stronger Democratic support than the election results.”

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Wouldn’t American voters eventually note the constant disparity between poll numbers and election outcomes, and cry foul? They might—except that polling numbers, too, are being quietly shifted.

Exit-poll data is provided by the National Election Pool, a corporate-media consortium consisting of the three major television networks plus CNN, Fox News, and the Associated Press. The NEP relies in turn on two companies, Edison Research and Mitofsky International, to conduct and analyze the actual polling. However, few Americans realize that the final exit polls on Election Day are adjusted by the pollsters—in other words, weighted according to the computerized-voting-machine totals.[2]

When challenged on these disparities, pollsters often point to methodological flaws. Within days of the 2004 election, Warren Mitofsky (who invented exit polls in 1967) appeared on television to unveil what became known as the “reluctant Bush responder” theory: “We suspect that the main reason was that the Kerry voters were more anxious to participate in our exit polls than the Bush voters.”

But some analysts and pollsters insist this theory is entirely unproven. “I don’t think the pollsters have really made a convincing case that it’s solely methodological,” Moore told me. In Moore’s opinion, the NEP could resolve the whole issue by making raw, unadjusted, precinct-level data available to the public. “Our great, free, and open media are concealing data so that it cannot be analyzed,” Moore charges. Their argument that such data is proprietary and would allow analysts to deduce which votes were cast by specific individuals is, Moore insists, “specious at best.” He adds: “They have a communal responsibility to clarify whether there is a vote miscount going on. But so far there’s been no pressure on them to do so.”

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Some argue that the Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008 disprove the existence of the red shift. However, this may be a misinterpretation of complex political upheavals that occurred in each of those election years.

While Democrats won a majority in the House of Representatives in 2006, and the White House in 2008, post-election analyses did in fact suggest extensive red-shift rigging. But in both election cycles, these efforts simply failed to overcome eleventh-hour events so negative that they drastically undercut the projected wins for the GOP.

In 2006, it was the exposure of Republican representative Mark Foley’s sexual advances toward male congressional pages, and the long-standing cover-up of his behavior by GOP leadership. The scandal swirling around the outwardly homophobic Foley broke in a very ugly and public way, engulfing the entire party and causing a free fall in its polling numbers. The Democratic margin in the Cook Generic Congressional Ballot poll, which had been at 9 percent in early October, jumped to 26 percent by the week of the election.

The collapse of Lehman Brothers months before the 2008 elections had a similar effect on John McCain’s numbers. Pre-election polls showed that the American public blamed the Republicans for the imploding financial markets. “These political sea changes swamped a red shift that turned out to be under-calibrated,” argues Jonathan Simon, who speculates that Barack Obama actually won by a historic landslide, driven by an overwhelming backlash against the policies of the Bush Administration.

[2] Exit polls, of course, are designed to analyze demographic patterns as well as to predict outcomes. It makes sense to adjust for demographic data, but this process troublingly obscures the raw numbers, masking the often wide distance between exit-poll results and final vote tallies.