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Massachusetts Polls: Divergent Results But One Clear Finding

Mark Blumenthal | January 10, 2010

Topics: Divergent Polls , Likely Voters , Martha Coakley , Massachusetts , Scott Brown , Turnout

We have two new polls out in Massachusetts on the January 19 special election to fill Ted Kennedy's Senate seat, and their results could not be more different. The new survey conducted Saturday through Wednesday last week by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center on behalf of the *Boston Globe* shows Democrat Martha Coakley leading by 17 percentage points (53% to 36%), while a new automated poll conducted on Thursday and Friday by *Public Policy Polling* (PPP) shows a dead heat, with Brown one point ahead (48% to 47%). A third survey conducted on Monday by *Rasmussen Reports* has Coakley ahead by nine (50% to 41%).

Massachusetts Senate Special Election
Recent Surveys

Pollster	Dates	N/Pop	Brown %	Coakley %	Other %	Und %	Margin %
PPP	1/7-9	774 LV	48	47	-	6	+1R
Globe/UNH	1/2-6	554 LV	36	53	5	5	+17D
Rasmussen	1/4	500 LV	41	50	1	7	+9D

The disparity of the results is likely to provoke the usual angst about inconsistent polls, debates about past pollster accuracy and the customary conspiracy theories about intentional bias. Forgive me if I don't join in, because as different as these results seem to be, I think the discrepancies actually add up to a consistent and important finding on the state of voter preferences this past week.

Here are three things to keep in mind about polls on the special election:

Turnout Will Matter -- The big spread in results among the polls, and differences apparent within two of them, are all consistent in supporting one finding: The lower the turnout, the better the odds for Scott Brown. These differences indicate that the voters most interested and most likely to vote are Republican, while Democrats are more blasé.

Consider the differences in the table below from within *Globe*/UNH and Rasmussen surveys. Both show a dead even race among the most interested and certain voters, while Coakley leads by huge double-digit margins among all other voters.

Vote for Senate by Interest/Certainty to Vote

Pollster	N/Pop	Brown %	Coakley %	Other %	Und %	Margin %
UNH: Interest in Election?						
Extremely	150	47	47	2	3	+0D
Very	229	35	57	5	3	+22D
Smwht/Not	167	27	53	8	11	+26D
Rass: Certain to Vote?						
Certain	?	45	47	2	6	+2D
Not Certain	?	27	62	1	10	+35D

Those differences mean the overall results reported by any poll are going to be very sensitive to the "tightness" of the screen or likely voter model used. The more restrictive the screen, the closer the result. My assumption is that the "if you do not intend to vote...please hang up" automated methodology employed by PPP produced an effectively tighter screen and, thus, a likely voter sample closer to the "certain" or "extremely interested" subgroups of the *Boston Globe* and Rasmussen polls.

Pollsters can't predict turnout - I have yet to see any poll or statistical model that can predict voter turnout with precision, especially in an oddly timed special election like the one in Massachusetts. What pollsters try to do is monitor self reported enthusiasm and interest as compared to previous, comparable contests and try to calibrate their screens and models appropriately (although there is much debate among pollsters about the accuracy of those calibrations and their necessity).

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The bigger challenge in predicting turnout, however, has to do with something more fundamental: The size and makeup of the electorate will depend on decisions not yet made by those who may or may not vote on January 19. How many will become more interested and decide to vote over the next 9 days? I'm not sure any poll or methodology can predict that with confidence.

Keep in mind that as of this past week, most Massachusetts voters assumed that Coakley would win in a walk. According to *Globe*/UNH poll, nearly three quarters (74%) of Massachusetts voters believe Coakley will win, while only 11% say the same about Brown. In that sense, news of a narrowing race could work to Coakley's advantage if it convinces Democrats that their votes are needed and that Ted Kennedy's seat could be lost to the Republicans without their help.

Turnout differences complicate trend tracking - The big spread in these poll results complicates our ability to spot trends. For example, PPP's Tom Jensen last night noted that they fielded their poll on Thursday and Friday, while the *Globe*/UNH poll was fielded in the first part of last week (Saturday through Wednesday). The earlier start to the *Globe* poll, he wrote yesterday, "could make a difference] when things are moving fast." That's true in theory but difficult to evaluate in this case because we have to assume we are comparing an apple (the *Globe*/UNH results) to an orange (PPP) in terms of their likely voter samples.

Now that we have more than five polls released for this race, we should have our tracking chart posted (along with the [tracking table](#), probably later tonight), but be forewarned: The small number of polls and the big "house effects" among them mean that we will really need to limit ourselves to same-pollster comparisons to evaluate trends over the last week. Coakley lead by an average of 29 percentage points on three surveys conducted before the primary last year, but leads by an average of 8 point on the three surveys conducted this past week. So we will see narrowing of the margin between the trend lines on our chart. Has Brown continued to gain over the last week? To answer that questions, we will need o watch tracking polls conducted next week by the same pollsters in the field this week.

Do we have a clear picture today of who will win on January 19 and by how much? Probably not, but we do have a sense of the dynamics that will ultimately determine the outcome.

And one last thought for those covering and commenting on this race: please spare us the cliché about the outcome depending on which campaign's "troops" do the best job turning out their supporters. Field organizations can make a difference, especially when contests are close, but the discrepancies in enthusiasm we are seeing are unrelated to canvassing and phone banking. Conservative Republicans are angry and ready to walk on hot coals if necessary to register their discontent with the direction of government. If the enthusiasm gap narrows, it will be because Democrats come to believe that Martha Coakley shares their priorities, Scott Brown threatens those priorities and the outcome of the election is in doubt.

Update: Via Twitter, [Alex Lundry](#) notes that the *Globe* Poll tests independent Joseph L. Kennedy (no relation to the famous family), while the PPP poll does not. What's interesting about that is that the presence of a "Kennedy" on the ballot appears to cos Republican Brown more support than Democrat Coakley. Also, for what it's worth, roughly 90% of those who support "Kennedy" (4 of his 5 percentage points) have not yet "definitely decided on a candidate, and about the same number (90%) are voters that are less than "extremely interested" in the Senate race.

Update 2: [Nate Silver](#) reviews some of the other differences between the three polls.

Update 3: Our [chart](#) is now live:

By [Mark Blumenthal](#) | January 10, 2010 4:25 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(9\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



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A few comments.

1. You mean 62-27 for Rasmussen's unsure if they will vote.
2. Take a look at the difference among vote among party members in the different polls.

Am I the only one who doesn't only see this as an enthusiasm gap? I see it as a gap of whom indies are voting for?

48 vs. 42 for Coakley in UNH
63 vs. 31 for Brown in PPP

Pubs and Dems are pretty much the same.

The BIG difference in this is the projected vote among Independents. All three have Dems going strongly for Coakley and Pubs going for Brown. It's indies where Ras and PPP very much agree are going for Brown. Does that have to do with the way the party id is being asked (Ras and PPP have very similar ways of asking that question). I personally don't think it is.

Check out page 12 of the UNH writeup...

When the question is asked... are you a registered dem, undeclared, or pub vs. "do you generally think of yourself as as democrat..." etc. Democrats go 79 vs. 78 for Coakley, Repubs go 88 vs. 89 for Brown, Indies go 42 vs. 43 for Brown.

I have previously noted that special elections in this state tend to have party breakdowns very similar to regular elections.

The electorate being portrayed by PPP is very similar to what the exit polls had in 2006 (last off-year election with a somewhat exciting gubernatorial election):

Year Lib Mod Con
2006 26 51 23
PPP 26 47 27

Year Dems Reps Ind
2006 41 19 39
PPP 44 17 39

Posted on [January 10, 2010 5:27 PM](#)

Farleftandproud:

Other than a miracle, or something about her past, Coakley will win. The PPP poll is clearly wrong. No way would there be that kind of margin of error unless of course they just called random people. It was enough to get progressives to get out the vote this week, as a wake up call. Brown will be in for a lot of attacks this week, and with Kerry, Clinton and perhaps Barack Obama, Coakley will win.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 7:00 PM](#)

kth:

It's a current meme among the conservative insurgency that they are "independent", i.e., that the Republicans no longer speak for them. I wonder if the MA-Senate polling is picking this up, but modeling them as swing voters and thus overcounting the number of votes on the right side of the divide.

The Tea Party movement is perfectly entitled to call itself independent. But it would be wrong for pollsters to then weigh voting blocs based on a model that places independents between Republicans and Democrats. Instead of giving respondents that kind of latitude to self-identify, a better question might be of who they voted for last presidential election, which primary they voted in, etc.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 7:31 PM](#)

chris@PTS:

I feel there are two important polling issues at play here:

- 1) Is a likely voter screen better done in the sample stage rather than the survey stage.
- 2) What the effect of significant lower response rates has on the results in IVR polling.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 9:10 PM](#)

Farleftandproud:

This poll is really beyond belief. Mass voters don't change their minds about issues the way they do in states like VA, Ohio and others. The center/left institution is pretty set in Mass, but there are some

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Pollster.com: Massachusetts Polls: Diver...

conservative independents. There is no way PPP is a Democratic pollster. They would be out of business if they were. I have to wonder if the pollsters just randomly picked up a phone and called random people.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 9:18 PM](#)

Jordan:

I'm struggling to figure out if "Farleftandproud" is a conservative trying to make progressives look silly.

- 1) It is a fact that PPP is a Democrat affiliated pollster.
- 2) They are not out of business.
- 3) "Called random people" is the ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE in doing good polling.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 12:24 AM](#)

GARY WAGNER:

According to Gallup (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114016/state-states-political-party-affiliation.aspx>), democrats have a 34 point lead over republicans in massechusets. For the Globe, with its reputation of extreme liberal bias, to show a lead of only 17 points for Coakley has to be troubling to the democrats there.

The Globe included 56% democrats (15 points too high) and only 15% independents (24 points too low).

Reality is that Coakley's lead is probably somewhere in the high single digits - which has to be extremely worrisome for the democrats.

Just as news of a tighthening race might encourage democrats to come out and vote to keep Kennedy's seat away from a republican, it will possibly encourage non-democrats even more to come out and vote.

The senate is worried enough about it that they have a plan in place to delay seating Brown until after a vote on Healthcare. The Massechusetts secretary of state has vowed to help in this effort by not certifying the election results until February 20th. (<http://bostonherald.com/business/healthcare/view.bg?articleid=1224249&format=text>)

Posted on [January 11, 2010 9:41 AM](#)

GARY WAGNER:

One more comment. If Barrack Obama makes a personal appearance side-by-side with Coakley, you can be assured that the democrats there are in a blind desperate panic.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 9:59 AM](#)

[mascmen7](#):

Vote for Scott Brown for US Senate Jan 19. Dem spending will collapse dollar. You will be reduced to bartering for your food if Dem spending excesses continues per BVM at Bayside, NY.

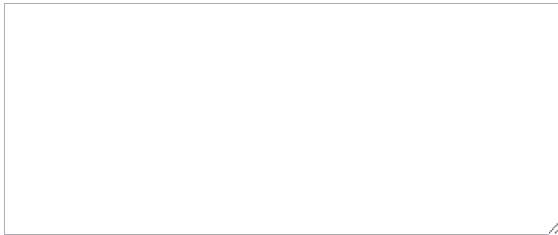
Posted on [January 11, 2010 2:03 PM](#)

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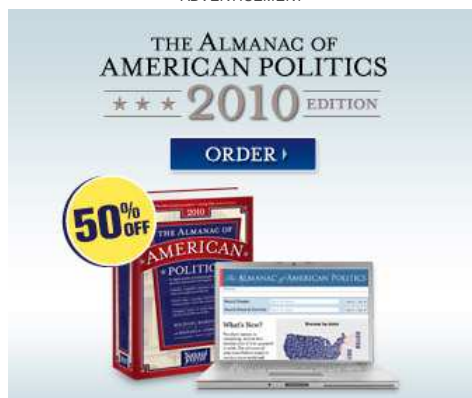


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