

Is There Really a “Bradley Effect” for Same-Sex Marriage Initiatives?

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Do voters lie to pollsters when asked their opinion on banning same-sex marriage? That question has arisen in California, where a new survey finds voters rejecting a proposed statewide ban on gay marriage by a decisive 17-point margin. Conservatives have countered with a study claiming that voters are driven by “political correctness” to substantially underreport their support for banning gay marriage to pollsters. But a careful analysis of polling data and election results indicates that if any such “Bradley effect” exists with regard to same-sex marriage initiatives, it is small—and in 2006 it was effectively zero. The gap between polls and election results is certainly not large enough to change the outcome in California if the election were held today.

A [Field Poll](#) conducted between September 5 and 14 found California likely voters opposed to the ban—which will appear on the November ballot as Proposition 8—by 55 to 38 percent, with 7 percent undecided. The poll is the [third](#) in as many [months](#) indicating that a majority of the state’s voters intends to vote no on Prop. 8, which would reverse a May ruling by the California Supreme Court giving same-sex couples the right to marry.

Should gays and lesbians be breaking out the Champagne? Not so fast, counter the sponsors of Prop. 8. A [study](#) released last week by the group ProtectMarriage.com contends that polls typically understate voters’ support for banning gay marriage. The study compares pre-election polling with actual Election Day results in 26 states that have voted on same-sex marriage initiatives since 1998. Its finding is that “support for these measures has been under-estimated by an average of seven percentage points.” The study concludes that many survey respondents who support marriage bans misreport their preferences to pollsters as “undecided” or even “opposed.”

Why might people feel they need to lie about their plans to vote for a ban on gay marriage? It could be due to what survey researchers call “social desirability bias”—the fear we all have of saying something socially inappropriate (even in a confidential telephone interview). Happily enough, as the public has [gradually warmed](#) toward gays and lesbians, it’s become less socially acceptable over the years to express anti-gay attitudes. One consequence, however, may be that polling has become a less accurate way to measure what people really think about gay rights.

A similar logic is at work in what has come to be called the “Bradley effect.” It takes its name from Tom Bradley, the African-American mayor of Los Angeles who staged an unsuccessful

run for governor of California in 1982. Two Field Polls conducted shortly before the 1982 election found Bradley with a significant lead over his Republican opponent, George Deukmejian. But Bradley ended up [losing](#) by just one percentage point. Analysts assume that one reason for the discrepancy between the polls and the election result was that white supporters of Deukmejian were reluctant to appear intolerant to survey researchers and thus falsely reported being “undecided.” Polls have similarly under-predicted the performance of white candidates running against African Americans in other high-profile races, including the 1989 contest for Virginia governor and the 1989 and 1993 New York City mayoral elections.

But recent research has suggested that the “Bradley effect” has subsided. A [paper](#) by Yale University’s Daniel Hopkins analyzing state-level elections since 1989 estimates that the size of the Bradley effect—which was never very big to begin with—is now effectively zero. Despite much hand-wringing in the media of a Bradley effect hurting Barack Obama, he actually [outperformed](#) pre-election polls on average by about three percentage points during the 2008 presidential primaries.

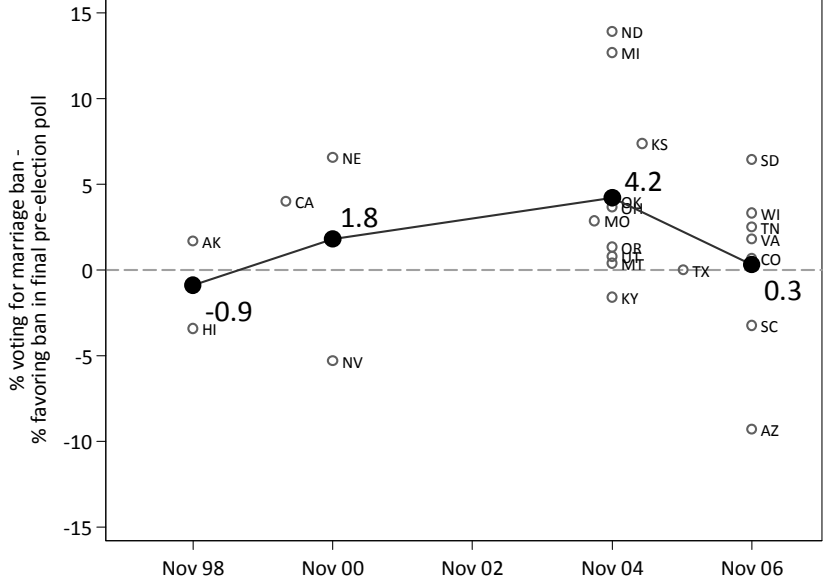
My analysis of the ProtectMarriage.com [data](#) suggests that we can draw a similar conclusion about same-sex marriage initiatives. As it turns out, the ProtectMarriage.com study’s methodology overstates the gap between polls and election results with calculations that implicitly allocate undecided survey respondents to the “oppose” category. Here’s an example. In November 2004, Utah voters passed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage by 66 percent to 34 percent. A poll released by *USA Today* shortly before the election found the amendment ahead by 60-32%, with 8% undecided. The ProtectMarriage.com study counts this as a six-percentage point gain in support from the survey to Election Day. But the share of supporters not only increased between the poll and the ballot box; so did the share of those opposed. The proper comparison is thus to compare the share of supporters among *decided* survey respondents—calculated as $60/(60+32) = 65\%$ —to the election result of 66%, for a gap of only one percentage point.

Reanalyzing the ProtectMarriage.com data this way yields the finding that if any Bradley effect is in place for same-sex marriage initiatives, it is small—and it is certainly not on the rise. Since 1998, the gap between polled support for marriage bans among decided voters and Election Day results has averaged only 2.2 percentage points. In 2006, the gap declined to just three-tenths of a point in the seven states holding initiatives for which data are available. Figure 1 plots the gap by state and by year and displays the annual mean for the four years (1998, 2000, 2004, and 2006) in which most of the initiatives were held. Table 1 displays the gap for all 23 states for which ProtectMarriage.com provided complete data.

Thus it is unlikely that recent polling on Prop. 8 in California substantially understates support for the initiative. Given how much the marriage ban is currently trailing in the polls, the probability is very low that if the election were held today a Bradley effect would lead to a Prop. 8 victory. Stay tuned, however: the pro- and anti-Prop. 8 forces have each raised [millions](#) to finance what will undoubtedly be a knock-down, drag-‘em-out fight via TV ads. A lot can change in seven weeks—including polls. But when new surveys are released, take voters at their word: they are telling the truth.

Figure 1. The Gap Between Pre-Election Support for Same-Sex Marriage Initiatives and Election Results, 1998-2006

Source for data: ProtectMarriage.com. Only states with complete data included.



**Table 1. Pre-Election Polling and Election Results
on State Same-Sex Marriage Initiatives,
1998-2006**

Source for data: ProtectMarriage.com. Only states with complete data are listed.

| date | state | pre-election poll | | | election result | | true gap between poll and election result |
|----------------|-------|-------------------|-------------|--|-----------------|-------------|---|
| | | favor | oppose | favor (as share of decided respondents) | favor | oppose | |
| 11-1998 | AK | 63 | 32 | 66.3 | 68 | 32 | 1.7 |
| 11-1998 | HI | 63 | 24 | 72.4 | 69 | 29 | -3.4 |
| 03-2000 | CA | 53 | 40 | 57.0 | 61 | 29 | 4.0 |
| 11-2000 | NE | 59 | 34 | 63.4 | 70 | 30 | 6.6 |
| 11-2000 | NV | 61 | 20 | 75.3 | 70 | 30 | -5.3 |
| 08-2004 | MO | 62 | 29 | 68.1 | 71 | 29 | 2.9 |
| 11-2004 | KY | 72 | 22 | 76.6 | 75 | 25 | -1.6 |
| 11-2004 | MI | 44 | 51 | 46.3 | 59 | 41 | 12.7 |
| 11-2004 | MT | 61 | 32 | 65.6 | 66 | 34 | 0.4 |
| 11-2004 | ND | 52 | 36 | 59.1 | 73 | 27 | 13.9 |
| 11-2004 | OH | 56 | 40 | 58.3 | 62 | 38 | 3.7 |
| 11-2004 | OK | 72 | 28 | 72.0 | 76 | 24 | 4.0 |
| 11-2004 | OR | 54 | 43 | 55.7 | 57 | 43 | 1.3 |
| 11-2004 | UT | 60 | 32 | 65.2 | 66 | 34 | 0.8 |
| 04-2005 | KS | 62 | 37 | 62.6 | 70 | 30 | 7.4 |
| 11-2005 | TX | 76 | 24 | 76.0 | 76 | 24 | 0.0 |
| 11-2006 | AZ | 51 | 38 | 57.3 | 48 | 52 | -9.3 |
| 11-2006 | CO | 52 | 42 | 55.3 | 56 | 44 | 0.7 |
| 11-2006 | SC | 78 | 18 | 81.3 | 78 | 22 | -3.3 |
| 11-2006 | SD | 41 | 49 | 45.6 | 52 | 48 | 6.4 |
| 11-2006 | TN | 73 | 20 | 78.5 | 81 | 19 | 2.5 |
| 11-2006 | VA | 53 | 43 | 55.2 | 57 | 43 | 1.8 |
| 11-2006 | WI | 54 | 43 | 55.7 | 59 | 41 | 3.3 |
| average | | 59.7 | 33.8 | 63.9 | 66.1 | 33.4 | 2.2 |