Today this type of polling, when done in association with political races, is typically done as an exit poll, a survey conducted after voters cast their ballots to gauge their reasons for voting for or against particular candidates or issues.

The Utah Colleges Exit Poll, or UCEP, has been learning the people’s opinions and providing accurate polling data on elections for decades. It was first established in 1982 and provided its results for local, state, and national elections. Administered by faculty and students at BYU, the poll has since grown to include the efforts of over 2,000 student volunteers from six Utah universities.

UCEP’s students and faculty members conducted exit polls for the United States presidential election in 2016. Once the poll results were in, BYU shared the outcomes with KBYU-TV, which then broadcast them and sent them to MSN and CBS. Edison Research says that the Utah Colleges Exit Poll was “a valuable resource both for academic study and for understanding the Utah electorate.”

More than 2,160 students volunteered, gathering over 26,500 completed surveys. Brodie Wray, a BYU junior who is double majoring in political science and statistics, managed the volunteers, designed the sample and phone system, communicated with the press and other schools, programmed web tools, and analyzed the data on election night.

She attributes the accuracy of UCEP to the professors and students involved.

“Our accuracy is due in large part to the experience and dedication on the team. It was [directed by] a team of four professors [and] five students. Each of the professors have been doing this project for a really long time, and the students are top political science and statistics students. We started working on the project in May [2016], whereas most national polls started working a few months before the election. This allowed us to visit polling places during the primaries to make sure we would organize our poll as well as possible,” Wray says.

Becca Dudley was one of the student volunteers. After classmate and professor recommendations, she decided to take the Public Opinion and Voting Behavior class, which is solely dedicated to launching UCEP. She says of her experience: “I was really excited to be a part of the exit poll because I felt like I really had the chance to apply what I . . . learned in an important setting. It was a great balance of using skills we have been taught and knowledge we’ve gained combined with stretching our capacity for management and organization and using a lot of creativity . . . I thrive on chaos and I knew that it would be three straight months of an adrenaline rush.”

Unpredicted poll results

Many voters in the 2016 presidential election were shocked at the results of the contentious campaign: Donald J. Trump as president-elect, though up to and even through Election Day, Hillary Clinton was the projected winner. Analysts at the Pew Research Center wrote: “Relying largely on opinion polls, election forecasters put Clinton’s chance of winning at anywhere from 70 percent to as high as 99 percent and pegged her as the heavy favorite to win a number of states such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin that in the end were taken by Trump.”

Across the nation, on the night of the election, exit polls seemed to show that Hillary Clinton would win. She did, in fact, win the popular vote, but by a much smaller margin than the polls predicted. In Utah, Donald Trump was predicted to win the state, but he
won by a greater percentage than predicted, while Clinton lost by a greater percentage than anticipated.

These discrepancies left the nation looking for an explanation of poll results and questioning the accuracy and even future of exit polls. Exit poll data was more controversial in 2016 than ever before, leaving some to question their usefulness. The Utah Colleges Exit Poll, however, has long been among the most accurate in the country. For a variety of reasons, this held true for this campaign and speaks to the benefit of exit polls as a whole. “Across the board,” said Pew analysts Deana DeMarini and Kyle McGeeney, “polls underestimated Trump’s level of support.” Dr. David Magleby, founder and administrator of the UCEP, says: “[Clinton] did win the popular vote... so much of the post-election criticism is misguided. This is not about the pre-election polls being problematic, but that is because the president is not decided by the popular vote nationally. Polls in some states missed how close those [margins] were.”

However, none of the possible causes of the discrepancies for which the exit poll industry was criticized—things like the possibility that some Trump voters may have been ashamed to tell pollsters who they voted for, so they lied—apply to UCEP, nor do they speak to the core cause of the confusion, which is a misunderstanding of the fact that exit poll data is not an actual tally of votes. Exit polling is, by nature, a reporting of those votes by the voters themselves and, to some extent, the reasoning behind the voting. Its overall usefulness lies in that richness of information, not in how closely it matches election results. “The role of polling in a democracy goes far beyond simply predicting the horse race,” say Andrew Mercer, Deane Mercer, and Kyle McGeeney of the Pew Research Center in an article about why 2016 exit polls missed their mark. “At its best,” they said, “polling provides an equal voice to everyone and helps to give expression to the public’s needs and wants in ways that elections may be too blunt to do.”

To that end, UCEP measured not only voters’ reports of who and what they voted for against but also how much the media and opinions of others influenced their vote. They also gauged the amount of confidence voters had that their ballots were counted correctly, whether voters were satisfied with their voting experiences, how they felt on the issue of Syrian refugees being allowed into Utah, how they felt about immigration in general, and whether or not Muslims should be more closely monitored. These results were shown by presidential vote alignment. For instance, many more Trump voters than Clinton voters stated that refugees should not be allowed into Utah.

**ROLE OF THE POLL**

UCEP gathered this data in more ways than ever before: over the phone, online, and in person after people voted. And, in the compilation and analysis of that wealth of information, it was challenged by a big surge in early voting, as well as difficulties caused by people’s reluctance to answer phone calls from numbers they didn’t recognize on their mobile phones. These challenges were, to some extent, unprecedented.

Regardless of them, though, the way UCEP compiled and reported its data didn’t change, staying consistent with the best practices of the industry. Edison Research, the sole provider of exit poll research for most major television networks and the Associated Press from 2003 to the present day, states that, according to their research on best practices of accurate exit polls, legitimacy depends on the use of trained volunteers, unbiased surveys, and proper sampling techniques. Transparency is a top priority—the poll’s methods, sponsor, and questionnaire tactics must be apparent to voters. Pollsters should question voters during the entire time the poll is open and also including absentee and mail-in voters. Consideration must be taken for nonresponse bias by capturing every demographic.

UCEP met all of these criteria, as described at exitpoll.byu.edu and in a paper delivered at the 2016 annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in Hollywood, Florida. David Magleby explains that UCEP actually does two exit polls—the first, of early voters who are contacted by postcard and phone, and the second, of voters on Election Day at the polls—and then statisticians merge the data to increase accuracy. He also speaks about the importance of exit polls: “The utility of exit polls is in helping voters and analysts understand who voted and why people voted,” he said. “Our poll focused attention on the ways people vote and how they felt about early voting, voting by mail, and in-person voting on Election Day.”

Wray adds that their poll gauged not only self-reported presidential votes but also how people felt about the candidates’ characters, policies, morals, and so on and the reasons behind their votes. He says: “One of the interesting things our exit poll found that would not have been portrayed from simple election counts is that only half of those that voted for Donald Trump were voting for him rather than against Hillary Clinton. This is interesting and could only be found in an exit poll.”

“Overall, exit polls are extremely useful, as they provide us with information we otherwise would never have. We can see what predicts [voting] patterns to help campaigns, we can see what is important to the general public, we can see how voters view government, etc.” Wray says.

At a time when polls are facing all kinds of new challenges, it’s more important than ever to have good polling. In spite of those challenges, UCEP proves its relevance—and the relevance of polling in general—by continuing to provide accurate, reliable polls.

**NOTES**

1. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

Find out more at http://exitpoll.byu.edu/