cygnal

The Accurate Way to Execute Automated Polling

Executive Summary

Automated polling – also known as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) – has a bad reputation in the survey research world, largely because robo-polls do not necessarily have the best track record. Various factors contribute to this problem, but most are the result of poor implementation - sloppy front-end work, inaccurate sample collection, over-dependence on weighting, and some with no weighting at all – not the collection method.

For all these reasons, we take a different approach to automated polling. Regardless of the collection method – fully automated, automated/live cell mix, or fully live - our results solidify the fact that Cygnal's methodology is reliable, as we will show throughout this paper.

We do not intend to replace traditional pollsters. Some of our best friends in the business are traditional pollsters, and we rely on them to complete comprehensive quantitative and qualitative benchmark research on behalf of our clients. Rather, it is our goal to make useful survey research available to every political race and non-profit in the country.

What we provide is useful for candidate viability, head-to-head ballots, favorability, and basic message testing. Our strength is pegging electoral results when other firms have trouble even getting close. The niche we have carved out is most applicable for down-ballot candidates, state legislative caucuses, associations playing in multiple races, and non-profits looking for cost effective research tools. Read on to find out why Cygnal is different, allowing us to offer comprehensive survey research starting under $3,000.

Current Problem: Perceived Inaccuracy of All Automated Polls

Automated pollsters. Robo-pollsters. IVR surveys. These terms tend to bring bile to the mouths of traditional pollsters, and frankly, often for good reason. As voters continue to shed their landlines, IVR-only surveys in many states and districts lose their effectiveness due to their inability to provide a representative sample. This challenge is understandable, but it is an obstacle that can be overcome.

We do not consider ourselves in the same category as robo-pollsters. Automated just happens to be a segment of research data collection in which we excel. The same techniques utilized by survey researchers in the traditional sense are what we employ in all our methods. How we treat data or conduct our polls is no different.

Let us give an example. A survey of a town's residents via paper clipboard is potentially an accurate method of data collection so long as the sample is representative of the town. Now, what if you were to spend 70% of your time in one or two of the ten neighborhoods that make up the area? Your resultant sample would not be representative of the population as a whole.

Phone polling is no different, which is why even some of the giants in the business have stumbled – quite publically - as of late. Heck, just look at Republican polling as a whole during the 2012 presidential race. Inaccuracy happens in polling when the sample collected does not represent the voting universe. Automated polls have inherently more bias in this area, unless properly compensated for before, during, and after the calls are made.

Cygnal's Approach: Using Automated Collection for Accurate Survey Research

So how do you compensate for sample bias? Where most automated pollsters go awry is taking the response of every person who completes a touchtone poll and weighting to an expected turnout universe, if they even go that far. Many points of failure arise using this methodology. First, the expected turnout universe must be used on the front end to stratify potential respondents. Second, the survey collection must follow the same process used in CATI-based live calls. Third, the final raw sample must be close to the final weighted results. When weighting is applied to a properly conducted automated survey, or any survey for that matter, the results should not drastically change.

We admittedly do not come from a polling background, but we do have statistical understanding and a wealth of experience in conducting this type of research. There are pros and cons to this approach. Our biggest advantage is that we have built a methodology for polling that correctly anticipates turnout and thoroughly fills an accurate representative sample.

Cygnal also differentiates itself from other "non-traditional" pollsters by adhering to rigorous checks and balances throughout the process. Without giving away our secret sauce, it is safe to say that established systems lead to verifiably solid results. As you will see below, we are the outlier, and that's a good thing, in the automated/IRV polling space.

Only Firm to Accurately Call AL-06 Primary & Runoff Results

No race offers better confirmation of our method than the AL-06 Republican primary and runoff. This was the most expensive and heated federal race in the state in the last two decades. Emily Cahn with Roll Call covered the race throughout and referred to it as the "most moneyed primary in the South." Seven individuals qualified and spent millions in hopes of making a runoff. The majority of public polling data showed the race as a battle between state Rep. Paul DeMarco and either Chad Mathis or Scott Beason.
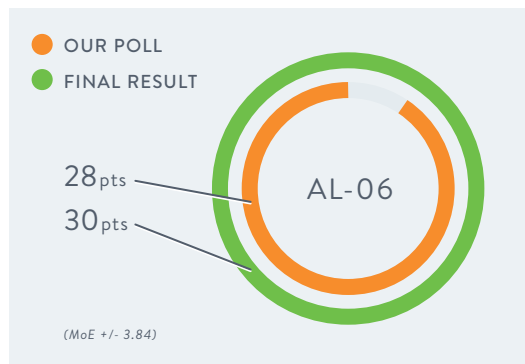
Cygnal conducted an automated flash poll for AL-06 and completed the results on May 24, 2014, ten days before the primary election. The results were not released until the day after the primary. We were the only firm who had Gary Palmer in second place behind DeMarco. We were right. Not only that, we pegged every candidate within the margin of error except DeMarco, which makes sense, because he was the most well-known candidate in a crowded field.
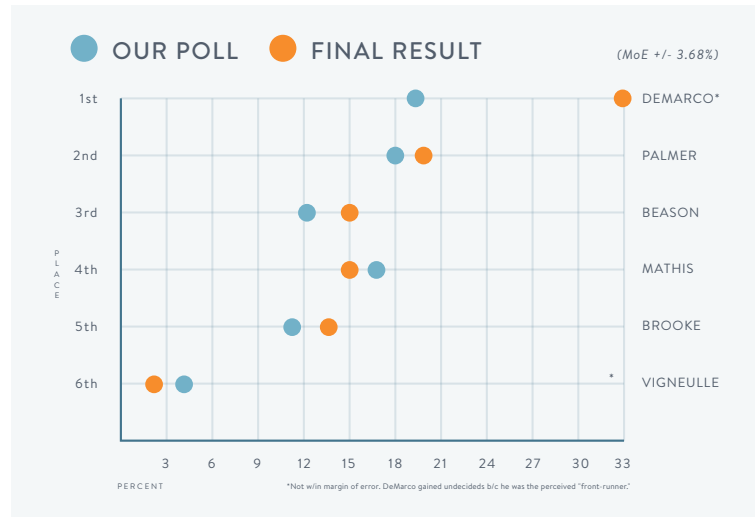
Any pollster will tell you that a partisan primary runoff is one of the most difficult types of races to peg. On July 9, 2014, we publicly released the results of our runoff poll and received skeptical media coverage: AL.com, Birmingham Business Journal, ABC 33/40, Daily Kos, and talk radio. No one could believe that Gary Palmer had gone from 13 points down to 30 points up in five weeks. We believed it, because that's what our polling showed.

On election night, Brent Buchanan, our managing partner, and Cory Brown, our Vice President of Data & Strategy, watched the results come in from a hotel room in downtown Chicago. The first numbers reported just about knocked them out of their seats. A little less than an hour after polls closed, it was obvious that Gary Palmer was going to win, and win big. Palmer ended up "swamping" DeMarco by 28 points, within the margin of our survey.

After having the most accurate polling results in the race, one of our biggest detractors begrudgingly named us one of the "6 big winners from Alabama's 2014 runoff elections that you may not be thinking about." We were honored to be named number two after Rick Burgess from the famed *Rick & Bubba Show.*

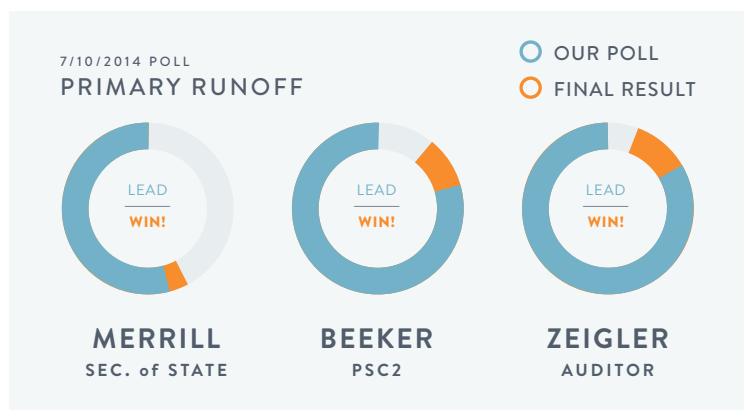## Supporting Results: Other Alabama Primaries & Runoffs

As has been said, it ain't bragging if you can back it up, and being spot on using automated surveys is nothing new for us. Cygnal has been polling with this methodology for over two years and honing our skills with each new survey. We had a very generous client engage us to run over thirty surveys in Alabama during the primary and runoff, so we have some strong supporting data to show how accurate we were in the smaller races as well.

MARGIN OF VICTORY
LT. GOV KAY IVEY

OUR CALL:	FINAL RESULT:
23.5%	**23.4%**

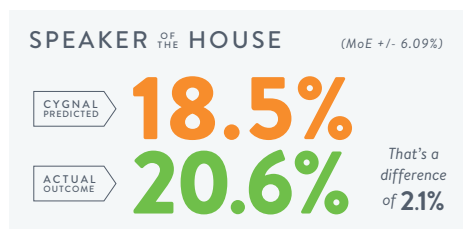*That's a difference of 0.01%*

Our original statewide poll conducted on May 30, 2014, got every race correct as to who would win and who would be in the runoffs. In the Lt. Governor's race, we said the margin of victory for sitting Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey would be 23.5%, and the final results were 23.4%.

We polled again on July 10, 2014 for the primary runoff, showing a slim lead for John Merrill (SoS) and decent leads for Chip Beeker (PSC#2) and Jim Zeigler (Auditor). On election night, Merrill eked out a win while Beeker and Zeigler cruised to victory. We were correct despite showing nearly half undecided voters in the survey.

7/10/2014 POLL
PRIMARY RUNOFF

○ OUR POLL
○ FINAL RESULT

LEAD
WIN!
MERRILL
SEC. of STATE

LEAD
WIN!
BEEKER
PSC2

LEAD
WIN!
ZEIGLER
AUDITOR

No primary race for the Alabama legislature was more fierce and expensive than that of the Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard. He spent $790k defending his seat, while his challenger, local businessman Sandy Toomer spent $280k and had the teacher's union expend another $300k+ on his behalf. Polling results were showing extremes, so we surveyed using our automated methodology. The results were that the Speaker would win by 18.5%, and Election Day was not much different at 20.6%, well within the margin of error.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE   *(MoE +/- 6.09%)*

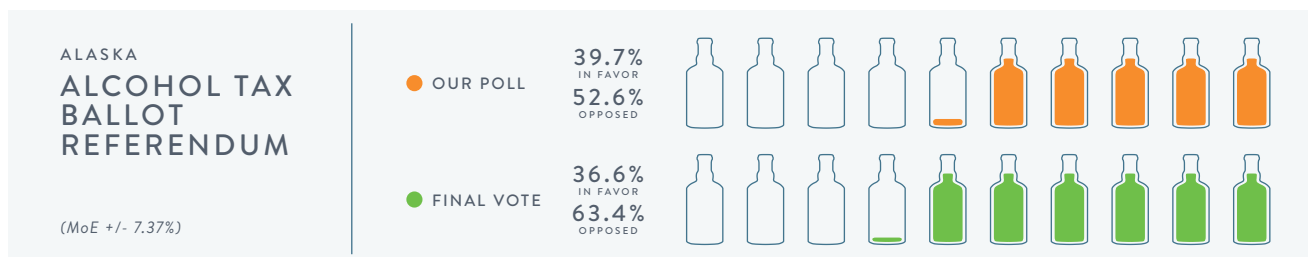| CYGNAL PREDICTED	**18.5%**	
ACTUAL OUTCOME	**20.6%**	*That's a difference of **2.1%***

We also polled three state senate races in the runoff – ALSD22, ALSD01, and ALSD30, nailing each one. In ALSD22, two weeks out we showed a 21.7% margin for Albritton over D'Olive (5.11% MoE); final result was a 15.4% margin win for Albritton. In ALSD01, one week out we showed a 14.3% margin for Melson over Seibert (5.49% MoE); final result was a 14% margin win for Melson. In ALSD30, a race where well more than a million dollars was spent, one week out we showed a 31.2% margin for Chambliss (5.44% MoE); final result was a 30% margin win for Chambliss.

● ALSD22
● ALSD01
● ALSD30

OUR POLL
FINAL RESULT

0%   5%   10%   15%   20%   25%   30%
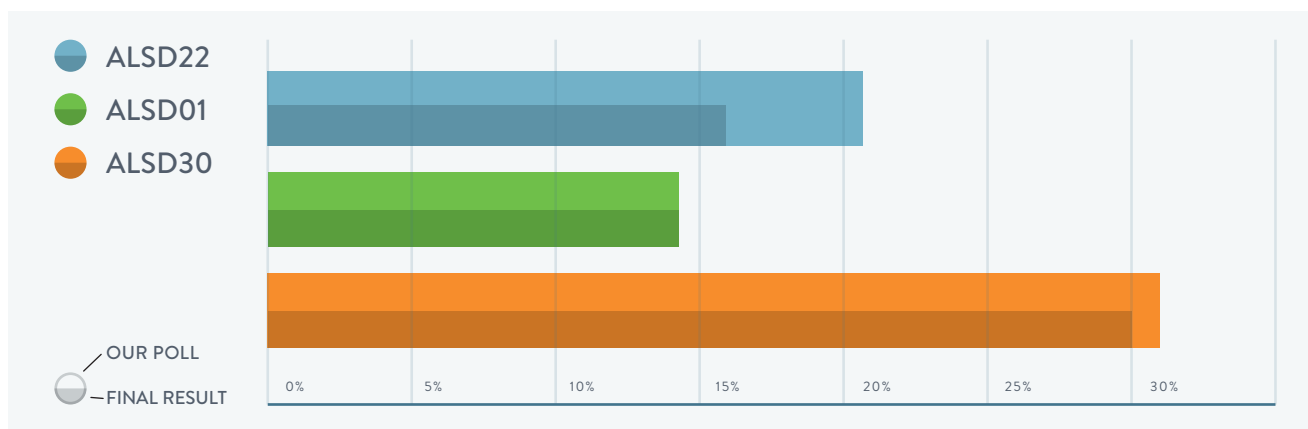
Supporting Results: Polling Outside Alabama

Although we have conducted over seventy polls in Alabama, Cygnal has worked from coast-to-coast. In a vast borough in Alaska, we were asked to conduct automated survey research on an alcohol tax ballot referendum. Six weeks out from the vote, we showed 39.7% support for the tax and 52.6% opposition to the tax (7.37% MoE). The final vote was 36.6% support and 63.4% oppose.

ALASKA
ALCOHOL TAX BALLOT REFERENDUM

(MoE +/- 7.37%)

OUR POLL — 39.7% IN FAVOR / 52.6% OPPOSED

FINAL VOTE — 36.6% IN FAVOR / 63.4% OPPOSED

In Virginia, we worked an off-year state legislative general election race. Three weeks out in VAHD012, our firm showed Yost up 8.5 points (3.46% MoE), and his final margin on Election Day was 4.9% after some issues tightened up the race.

Much of our other work around the country thus far has been issue-based, some dealing with municipal votes where a public affairs firm needed to show public opposition to an issue. Since we have a solid methodology, where we poll is not nearly as important as how we poll.

Our Methodology is the Secret Sauce that Makes It Work

- Start with high quality demographic and contact data from the population to be researched.
- Determine from the population who has the potential likelihood to participate in an election.
- Use that determination to develop a random sample to field.
  Ensure that the random sample is stratified according to key demographic and fully representative of the population.
- Utilize professional voice recordings and tactics that ensure maximum participation and high response rates to gather a large, statistically relevant sample of the population.
- Weight the sample according to key demographics and geography to ensure the sample is representative of the modeled turnout electorate.
- Compare the weighted sample to the target population along several key indicators to ensure it matches.

This may seem light on details, and that's partially because the real secrets to our success won't be put on paper for public consumption. You'll find very few robo-pollsters using sound methodology to collect a sample, and we would rather not help them catch up!

Statistics is a science, but there is an art to accurate polling. At Cygnal, we subscribe to sound, proven methods of survey research, but ours is a product developed by experimentation, creativity, and evolution. We are not held back by outdated practices, nor are we blinded by future possibilities that might or might not arrive someday. Obstacles to survey research are just new opportunities to excel. We adapt, improvise, and overcome to stay on the cusp of accurate polling.

In this tech-driven environment, data – accurate, relevant data – is of the utmost importance. That is why we partner with the foremost data company in the world. This partnership allows us to drill down into any population to model the most likely electorate for any campaign. Combined with our ability to understand historical significance and "what's in play on the ground," we can draw the right population to establish a representative sample.

Fielding the survey has a definite impact as well. Our surveys are written to eliminate bias and gather information needed to produce accurate results. We have voice professionals follow our written processes to keep response rates high. In order to enhance the fielding method, we establish goals according to the demographics of the population furthering our ability to collect a pure, representative sample.

Once the responses have been collected, the job really begins. Many outfits that offer automated polling simply dump numbers into a dialing program and give you the totals it spits out. This is wrong, wrong, wrong! It ignores perhaps the most important component of conducting survey research - ensuring the collected sample is representative of the population. Cygnal flourishes in this area. We correctly weight the collected sample using proven techniques that cause the least amount of stress bias on the sample, thus achieving highly accurate forecasts of whatever situation we are researching.

Alternative Options: Utilizing Hybrid Live/Cell and Full Live Sample Collection
Although we conduct a lot of automated survey research, we are also able to procure accurate samples through two other methods – automated landlines/live cell mix and fully live. The same principles of data collection are used, but the costs are higher. We do highly recommend our clients to use the automated landline/live cell mix when cell phone penetration among the target population is above a certain threshold.

Conclusion
Our goal throughout this study was to show that highly accurate, cost-effective automated polling exists. It's a solution that we make available to organizations and groups who otherwise couldn't afford traditional research. Cygnal is different, in a good way, and we are ready to help your campaign or group conduct survey research that leads to making better decisions.