



Search Terms: Polling is in trouble

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Understanding the polls

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The first of two pieces looking back at the mechanics of the election assesses the pollsters' performance

FOUR years ago, misled by the exit polls, America's television networks predicted and unpredicted the result half a dozen times. In 2004, after spending millions on a new system, the exit polls were wrong again, in a brand new way. Early on polling day, they showed John Kerry with a commanding lead. To misquote Lady Bracknell, to mess up one election may be considered a misfortune. To muck up two looks like carelessness.

**Polling is in trouble**, and not just exit polling. More voters are refusing to answer pollsters' questions. Representative samples of the population are harder to come by. Pollsters cannot properly survey the increasing numbers of people who use mobile phones or the internet. "Some pundits", says John Zogby, a pollster, "are ready to declare that polls are dead."

Pollsters do face serious problems, but imminent death is not one of them. In fact, this year's election has bought them a few more years of life. The average of polls in the final days of the campaign was remarkably accurate: it showed George Bush getting 50% of the vote to John Kerry's 48.5% (the final tally was 51% to 48.1%). If anything, the polls have been victims of their own success. Every news outlet now seems to have its own pollster. This almost certainly improves the polling average, but it also means that, at any one time, there will be a couple of misleading outliers.

So why the doom-saying? Several technical problems bedevil polls. The most worrying is the decline in the response rate. In 1997, according to the Pew Research Centre, a typical poll conducted over five days would get responses from 36% of households; in 2003 the rate was 27%.

The decline has not yet undermined the validity of polls—as the accuracy of the final surveys suggests. Pew ran a control experiment comparing a typical poll with one lasting five months. The results were almost the same, even though the long-lasting survey had a much higher response rate (51%). At some point, presumably, the rate will dip below a critical level and results could go haywire. But that has not happened yet. The "extra" respondents you get from a big poll seem to be no different from those who answer a typical one.

But what if those who refuse to answer come disproportionately from one group? Warren Mitofsky, one of the designers of this year's exit polls, suggests that just such a "differential refusal" skewed his results. "We suspect", he told PBS's NewsHour, "that the main reason was that the Kerry voters were more anxious to participate in our exit polls than the Bush voters."

This would be the first time a group of non-responders was different enough from the average to have an impact. But the evidence is patchy. Earlier in the campaign, pollsters worried that Bush supporters were more likely to answer questions than Kerry ones. "Refusal bias" is a growing problem. But it is not clear how serious it is right now.

That is also true of the "cell-phone" difficulty. By law, Americans pollsters may not contact mobile telephones, so they missed the 7% of voters who said they

used only these. That is not a large or distinctive enough group to skew the polls. But the figure rises to nearly 20% among voters below the age of 30. Over time, they could become a big enough share of the electorate to make a difference.

That is for the future. In this election, the biggest polling problem was how to identify likely voters. Because turnout in America is below 60%, pollsters adjust their raw numbers to screen out people deemed unlikely to vote and also to ensure that their sample properly represents ethnic minorities, women, registered Democrats and Republicans, and so on.

The trouble is that, by reducing the size of the sample, screening produced implausible volatility in the middle of the campaign. Frequently, half the polls would show Mr Bush's vote rising while the other half showed it falling. Jon Krosnick of Stanford University also points out that screening produced an illusory "bounce" after each convention. The screen let through a disproportionate number of Democrats after the Democratic convention, and Republicans after the Republican one. But no one had really changed their minds.

On the other hand, not having a tough enough screen can be worse than having one. And here *The Economist* has to own up to problems of our own. YouGov, a firm that has used internet polling successfully in Britain and Australia, polled for us in America without sufficiently seeking to gauge respondents' likelihood to vote. Its final poll showed Mr Kerry up by three points among registered voters. Interestingly, YouGov says that if you recalibrate its final poll to reflect the demography of the voters who actually showed up on November 2nd, its panel showed a Bush lead (fewer blacks and poor people actually voted than YouGov researchers expected).

Are there better ways to find likely voters? Andy Kohut at Pew argues that traditional techniques—in which you decide in advance the demographic features of your sample and include only a predetermined share of likely voters—work less well than so-called "database techniques". The latter use computer programmes to adjust the sample based on the actual responses.

Polling is here to stay. In a country the size of America, it is the only way to bring cohesion to a mass of anecdotal evidence. But it needs to be taken—early in the campaign, especially—with the proverbial pinch of salt.

**GRAPHIC:** A differential refusal

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