

# Survey says: Read between the lines with election year poll results

Political surveys are the scapegoat of new-age politics. Pundits gripe that the flood of numbers obscures policy issues. Blow-dried television anchormen appear on C-SPAN to slap themselves on the wrist for focusing too heavily on horse-racer coverage. Candidates say summer surveys are meaningless. Everybody important enough to garner sound-bite time argues that day-to-day changes in survey results reveal wild fluctuations in the electorate.

Amid all this posturing, it's important to remember one bit of advice: Polls don't mislead people; people mislead people. When poll results change from one day to the next, or when two polls reported on the same day differ dramatically, it's easy to blame the black magic of surveys. Most likely, however, the variations are due to different survey methodologies or actual changes in the political landscape.

Consider, for example, two national surveys released recently. The first survey, which appeared Aug. 21, indicated that Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton had tumbled into a virtual dead heat with George Bush. The poll, conducted by The New York Times and CBS, showed Clinton with 45 percent and Bush with 42 percent.

But on Aug. 26, the Times reported the results of another poll conducted in cooperation with CBS. This time, the front-page headline said: "Bush's Gains from Convention Nearly Evaporate in Latest Poll." In this poll, Clinton was ahead of Bush 51 percent to 36 percent.

So what happened between Aug. 21 and Aug. 26? Did

thousands of Clinton supporters desert him during the Republican convention in favor of Bush, only to return to the Clinton camp the day after the GOP fete ended? Or was the wide swing mostly an artifact of how the surveys were conducted?

It's a safe bet that the latter explanation is largely true. A closer look at the two surveys reveals important details. The first poll, which showed Clinton ahead by 45 percent to 42 percent, was an overnight telephone survey conducted on the last day of the Republican convention.

Overnight telephone surveys generally are not as reliable as surveys conducted over several days because they are based on smaller samples that are less representative of the electorate. This worked in Bush's favor, for many folks sitting home ready to be surveyed Aug. 20 were GOP convention viewers who supported Bush.

The second poll, which showed Clinton leading by 51 percent to 36 percent, was conducted over two days and was based on 903 registered voters. Also, the first day of the poll was a Sunday, a day telephone pollsters generally have a better chance of reaching people in their homes.

The Times said the fluctuating poll numbers "provided fresh evidence of the loose allegiances of voters this year" and said voters "shifted back and forth" in the last two weeks.

**John Bare**

**Guest Columnist**

There is little doubt that the GOP convention did give Bush some sort of bounce that did cut into Clinton's lead. There also is evidence to support the notion that voters do not have strong ties to either Bush or Clinton.

Just the same, however, there is little doubt that the timing and structure of the Times surveys also affected the results. But it sounds flashier to blame rocky poll numbers on a mysterious evaporation of support than on the survey methodology.

With this in mind, remember five things when you try to make sense of polls between now and election day.

■ Poll results are probabilities. So if 51 percent of a sample of 903 registered voters favor Clinton, all you can say is that you are 95 percent sure that between 48 percent and 54 percent of all registered voters favor Clinton. It's not absolute.

■ Read the fine print. Was it an overnight quickie or a three-day survey? And take note of real-life crises that occurred while the poll was being conducted. If it's a survey about the merits of Bush's foreign policy, and the United States bombs Iraq on the second day of the survey, the results will change.

■ Why don't the numbers add up to 100 percent? If Clinton has 51 percent and Bush has 36 percent, then 13 percent of the respondents gave no answer or some other answer. The way pollsters ask their questions affects the number of respondents who fall into this black hole.

■ The election will be decided not by the popular vote as reported in the polls, but by the Electoral College. Whoever gets 270 Electoral College votes wins. So it's best to examine state-by-state poll results that reveal who is ahead in the richest electoral states.

■ Finally, don't forget Ross Perot, whose name will appear on every state ballot. The results of summer polls that force respondents to choose between only Bush and Clinton will become obsolete when the feisty Perot is thrust into the mix on election day.

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## Column policy

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Please follow these guidelines when submitting columns:

- Limit column length to 800 words.
- All columns should be signed and typed double-spaced.
- Please include your class, major, hometown and phone number.

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