For "Yes," Press 1

Automated polling at Rasmussen Research

By Scott W. Rasmussen

One of the pleasures in life is doing what others say can't be done. At Rasmussen Research, we regularly get that opportunity by conducting statistically reliable public opinion surveys using an automated interviewing technique. Despite many traditional opinion researchers saying it can't be done, our system is consistently validated by other opinion polls and actual election results.

On February 19, 2000, in partnership with the *Charlotte Observer*, we conducted a telephone exit survey in the South Carolina Republican primary. It was a difficult survey given the open nature of the primary, uncertainty about turnout, John McCain's appeal to non-Republicans, and the fact that it had to be conducted on a Saturday. Adding to the tension, early editions of the paper were scheduled to go to press and report our poll results before actual votes were counted. In fact, the *Observer's* web site trumpeted the results of our exit survey moments after the voting ended, invoking memories of the infamous *Dewey Defeats Truman* headline.

Fortunately, our results were on the money. We projected a 13-point victory for George W. Bush (52% to 39%); he won by 11 points (53% to 41%). We repeated this performance several times during the primaries by accurately projecting the outcomes of a number of elections before the votes were counted or the Voter News Service exit polling data were released. As far as we can determine, we were the first to publicly declare McCain the victor in Michigan and Bush the winner in New York.

We also conducted a number of pre-election polls during the primaries. For each primary, the leader in our final pre-election poll emerged victorious on election day (see Table 1). In fact, the *Progressive Review* conducted a "Pollster Run-Off" and found that we ranked number one as the most accurate polling firm during the 2000 primary election season. As a practical matter, the publication found very little difference between our results and those provided by the second and third place finishers (the Gallup Organization and Zogby International, respectively).

It's also important to note that our polling compares favorably to other work on more than just the top-line, last minute numbers. The shape of the race and internal dynamics also track with findings produced by other polling methodologies. For instance, heading into the GOP convention, we had Bush up by 12 points among likely voters; Gallup had his advantage at 11points. Coming out of the convention, Bush's advantage ballooned to 17 points in both polls.

Our results are also proving to be on target in non-election surveys. For example, on the day the Kosovo bombing began, we found 49% of Americans supporting the military response. A Gallup survey taken at the same time found 50% supported the attacks. As shown in Table 2, when comparing similar questions, other firms validate our work.

Table 1

Automated Polling on Super Tuesday

	Rasmussen's final pre-election polls		**Actual results**	
	Bush	*McCain*	*Bush*	*McCain*
California*	53%	24%	60%	35%
California	27	20	28	23
Georgia	65	22	67	28
Maryland	52	30	56	36
Massachusetts	30	60	32	65
Missouri	62	26	58	35
New York	46	42	51	43
Ohio	59	31	58	37

*****Republican voters only.

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Table 2

Comparing Surveys: A Few Recent Findings

	Support recent jury decision requiring tobacco companies to pay $145 billion in damages	*Support death penalty*	*Death penalty deters others*	*Support education vouchers*
Rasmussen	33%	70%	44%	54%
ABC News	--	63	--	--
Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*	37	66	--	--
Harris	--	--	44	--
Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup	--	--	--	51

Despite this track record, many still say automated polling can't possibly work. An editor has told me that he asked a traditional interviewer-assisted pollster about our automated approach. As expected, he was informed that an automated system can't produce accurate results. The editor persisted, told the pollster of our successful track record, and then asked how we could have achieved it. The researcher said he couldn't explain that, but he did know that automated polling wasn't reliable.

I am not defending automated polling in a generic sense; other firms who want to use automated techniques should speak for themselves. In fact, I take the same position in evaluating more traditional survey methods: I would not defend such techniques in a generic sense, either. Some firms do a great job with interviewer-assisted polling, others do a lousy job.

As with any opinion research, the most important step for us is designing the survey instrument. We take care in crafting questions that elicit useful information. We learn from our data and frequently go back into the field with a follow-up when we get surprising results.

Occasionally, we ask questions that have not been asked before. When this happens, we include other questions that can be compared to an existing body of survey research or actual data. This helps us establish confidence in the sample and the results for the new question. A recent example of this occurred in our financial research. Like other polling firms, we found earlier this year that most Americans thought the economy was in good or excellent shape. We also found, however, that just over half of all Americans believed there were major problems with the economy. Such a result would have been immediately rejected if we didn't have corresponding data to show that this uneasiness co-existed with generally positive feelings about the nation's economic performance in other surveys as well.

To place our calls, we randomly select phone numbers appropriate to the geographic market being surveyed. Throughout our company's history, we have used both listed-number samples and RDD samples, as appropriate.

With the survey instrument and sample in hand, we audio record the questions and response instructions. The voice is pleasant and conversational. During interviewing, respondents hear the recorded voice ask a question and provide instructions for responding. Typically, the response instructions are something like, "If yes, press 1; if no, press 2; if you are not sure, press 3." For a different survey, it might be, "If Gore, press 1; if Bush, press 2; if you are not sure, press 3." In other situations, the survey respondents are asked to give answers to open-ended questions in their own words.

Naturally, we have complete capabilities to branch depending upon responses given to a particular question; to rotate the response options; to conduct split samples; and to perform other such functions that are standard in interviewer-assisted polling.

For election surveys, we call a full sample of adults and then use a series of screening questions to determine which are likely voters. These include questions about their voting histories, their intentions to vote in the upcoming election, and other matters. As with all survey firms, developing screens to determine likely voters is one of our most challenging tasks. This is especially so during low-turnout primary elections.

We also screen respondents for a variety of other surveys, such as those of internet users, investors, or sports fans. As part of our general screening process, we include a series of "traps" to make sure people are providing reliable information about their own demographics. Through this approach, we typically screen out a modest number of teenagers who try to take the survey by initially claiming to be over 18.

When the survey is complete, we weight the data to reflect the population surveyed in terms of age, race, and gender. Typically, we find we have oversampled women, whites, and older Americans. We weight these populations down to an appropriate level relative to the rest of the sample.

Following the weighting process, we conduct a "sanity check" by comparing the sample's characteristics to verifiable data. This varies from survey to survey. In surveys conducted shortly after an election, we frequently compare the stated voting behavior of the sample to actual voting results. At other times, we might compare the employment status of the sample to what we know about the area's employment statistics. We also take a look at the findings of other survey firms.

> "It's not a question of which theory is best; it is a question of results."

After processing the data, we post them on our web site. Typically, we provide the question wording along with our summary of the data. We also post the survey date, sample size, margin of sampling error, and other relevant information. We will soon be adding increasing amounts of demographic data online so that researchers, journalists and others can explore the details of our findings.

While our survey technique has proven to be very reliable, it does have certain limitations. Our surveys are relatively short compared to traditional telephone surveys. We rarely keep respondents on the line for longer than five minutes. While this is good news for those who take the surveys, it does limit the number of questions and themes we can explore in a single interview.

Additionally, we are unable to conduct business-to-business surveys or other surveys in which we must get through a receptionist or switchboard to reach potential respondents. This limits our role exclusively to the consumer research arena.

Another limitation concerns open-ended questions. These are quite frustrating since they take far more processing time than closed-ended responses. Ironically, interviewer-assisted firms can get open-ended survey data out more quickly than we can because their operators can code or transcribe responses during the interview. We have to wait until the interview is complete to process the responses. As a result, we rarely ask open-ended questions, and when we do, we try to avoid asking more than one in a single survey.

On the other hand, our system has certain advantages over interviewer-assisted techniques. Perhaps the biggest is that when we conduct a tracking poll over a long period of time, we can ensure that the respondent who takes the survey on "day one" hears exactly the same question with the same nuances as the person who takes the survey a year later.

Still, the technique continues to raise questions from skeptics. One of the most puzzling to me is the question of response rates.

On the first pass, we find that one out of every four or five adults reached will complete a full interview. If we call those we couldn't reach on the first night at a different time on a different day, we get nearly the same response rate on the second night of calling. Even more important, the results we get from the second night of calling are essentially the same as the results we get on the first night. This is consistent with research conducted by the Pew Research Center suggesting that non-respondents to an initial survey are not significantly different in their views and attitudes from respondents. It also suggests that the reason many people don't respond to our surveys on the first night is because we caught them at a bad time, not because they didn't want to be surveyed.

When we make several call-backs on different days and times, we complete interviews with nearly 30% of those on our initial list of numbers. Still, we have never found a substantive difference in the results (beyond the margin of sampling error) between our single night surveys and surveys for which we conduct a vigorous call-back effort. This raises basic questions about what response rate is required for an accurate survey; but those questions are beyond the scope of this article.

Having said all of this, I recognize that no matter how many questions we address, the skeptics will always raise more. That's fine. Such responses remind me of Atlanta Braves fans who now say that it doesn't matter who wins the World Series. In fact, some go so far as to say that the best team is the one that wins the most regular season games. This attitude surfaced only *after* the New York Yankees won 3 out of 4 World Series championships. I don't recall the Braves ever saying in the pre-season that their goal was to win the most regular season games, and that they didn't care about the World Series.

In polling, producing accurate and reliable data is like winning the World Series. That's what we're here for. It's not a question of which theory is best; it is a question of results. That's what the Rasmussen Automated Polling System delivers.