WHAT WENT WRONG WITH EXIT POLLING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

By Warren J. Mitofsky

Fiorello LaGuardia, when confronted by reporters over a scandal in his administration, disarmed them by exclaiming, "When I make a mistake it's a beaut!" When Voter Research & Surveys makes a mistake before millions of viewers and readers of news reports about an election, it too is a beaut. The understatement of George Bush's victory over Patrick Buchanan in the New Hampshire primary meets that standard.

Here is what happened. VRS conducted an exit poll at a stratified probability sample of 60 precincts. Voters were selected systematically from the time the polls opened until shortly before the polls closed. Bush was expected to win by about a three-to-two margin, according to pre-election polls. He got 53% to Buchanan's 37%.

At 2 pm on primary day, a tabulation of the morning's exit poll interviews was made available to the network members (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC), as well as other subscribers, which included the Washington Post, the New York Times, USA Today, Knight-Ridder, and the Boston Globe. They in turn repeated the numbers to political and media insiders who were not subscribers. The poll showed a margin between Bush and Buchanan of only about six percentage points.

That early tabulation was intended as a preview of a poll that would be completed about 7 pm when most of the polls closed. Instead, it sent shock waves through the political world. There have been reports that, as a result of the close margin, the White House started a massive get-out-the-vote phone operation. Traders at the New York Stock Exchange were aware of the narrow margin, as were members of the House Democratic caucus. Indeed, it would have been hard to find a political insider who could not have told you the VRS estimate. One campaign source bragged that he had the VRS numbers all day.

VRS's exit poll varied only slightly during the day and still showed a six percentage point margin at poll closing. The VRS interpretation to all its participants was much more cautious than that made by the analysts viewing only the tabulation. VRS said, "Bush leading in a closer than expected race—Buchanan likely over 40%."

There are several things wrong. The most obvious is that VRS's poll understated Bush's victory margin. There was a bias of four points on each candidate. This was computed by comparing the poll result with the actual result in each sample precinct. This bias accounts for 8 of the 10 point understatement of the difference between the exit poll's outcome and the actual result.

A post mortem showed the following: Three other exit polls in New Hampshire had the same understatement of the margin. The VRS poll in the Democratic primary was accurate. The poll of Democrats was done in the same precincts, and used the same questionnaire. The Republican bias was not due to refusals that were correlated with age or gender. VRS routinely keeps track of the age and gender (and race, which was not relevant in New Hampshire) of those who refuse to participate, and then makes a noninterview adjustment to account for these characteristics. We believe the bias is due to the intensity of the Buchanan voters, not only to send a message to the president in the voting booth, but also to be more motivated to fill out an exit poll questionnaire.

Another concern about the events of February 18 was the rush to judgment by news media analysts reviewing the preliminary survey tabulations at 2 pm. At least they should have waited until the polls closed to make judgments. Looking at an exit poll halfway through the day is like announcing the final score of a football game at half time. It does not make any sense.

Even at day's end, these analysts lacked the statistical tools to interpret the outcome. If they had had them, they too might have been more cautious. The race *was* closer than expected. Buchanan was not over 40%. He finished with 37%. That discrepancy was due to the largest New Hampshire write-in vote since 1968. It accounted for 8% of the total Republican vote. It was not counted on the night of the primary or the next morning. Buchanan did receive 40% of the vote for candidates on the ballot.

The final concern is the widespread knowledge by media and political elites of exit poll results prior to poll closing. It is hard for outsiders to realize how rapidly news of VRS poll results traveled through this privileged audience starting at midday. VRS would like to be known for its interpretation of the outcome, and not what others conclude from incomplete information.

Warren J. Mitofsky is executive director, Voter Research & Surveys