

# Dueling Exit Polls

By James A. Barnes

Whether the Democrats can maintain control of the Senate and how many seats in the House of Representatives Republicans can pick up will be the major story of the 1994 Election Night for most viewers. For the poll watchers and public opinion analysts, however, there's another race to pay attention to. That's the competition, for the first time since 1986, between two national exit polls to interpret the results of the midterm elections.

The incumbent is Voter News Service (VNS), the television network exit polling consortium that has been joined by the Associated Press. The challenger is none other than Warren Mitofsky, the former head of the television polling combine, who oversaw the national and statewide exit surveys of voters in 1992 and 1990.

At the very least, the addition of a rival Election Day exit poll to the one run primarily by the television networks will provide an additional source of information for determining the meaning of the midterm elections. "On balance it's a plus that there is going to be at least one other national exit poll that will be reported on Election Day," said Tom Hannon, political director for CNN and that network's representative on the board of Voter News Service.

Mitofsky is currently preparing to conduct an exit poll for the upcoming Mexican elections, but he has already lined up perhaps the two most important print customers for this November, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He plans to test his methodology and computer programs in the Democratic mayoral primary in the District of Columbia this September.

Exit polls play an important role in shaping the initial analysis of the election returns. Besides reporting the results of how many House and Senate seats are won

and lost by each party, the media relies on information from the polls to put the multitude of races into a national context. These findings—such as understanding what issues mattered most to people in how they decided to cast their votes (one of the standard questions on exit polls)—will also influence how the Administration and the leaders on Capitol Hill tailor their agendas for the first session of the 104th Congress.

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Different exit polls with dissimilar questions can offer additional insights into the motives and reasoning of the voters.

### Pooling of Network Polling Resources

Recently, the television networks have been the single supplier of this information. Prior to the 1990 midterm elections, the news divisions of all three broadcast television networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, conducted their own exit poll in conjunction with a print media partner. But after the 1988 elections, as news divisions faced continued budget cuts, the networks decided to pool their resources and conduct one joint exit poll. That consortium was called Voter Research & Surveys (VRS), and Mitofsky, who had previously headed the CBS News Election and Survey Unit, became its director. CNN was invited by the big three to join the new polling operation, spreading the costs around even more.

The networks, in a further bid to save money after the 1992 elections, merged VRS with the News Election Service (another network Election Day pool arrangement with Associated Press). Mitofsky was not eager to share authority over the merged creation, which was renamed VNS, and as a result left the organization.

Having only one major source of information on the attitudes of voters troubled some consumers of the data. "When the networks combined we went from different sources to sort of a monopoly," said *Times* news surveys editor Michael R. Kagay. "We want to encourage more than one nationwide exit polling service," he said, explaining the decision by his paper to buy Mitofsky's poll, called the Election News Service (ENS). Kagay added that the *Times* could also still wind up buying some exit poll results from VNS.

This is not the first time someone has attempted to mount a competitive challenge to the network exit polls. In 1990, the Roper Organization, a survey research firm based in New York City, tried to persuade local newspapers and television stations to invest in an exit poll of their own. "I beat my head against the wall trying to do this," said John Brennan, director of polling for the *Los Angeles Times*, who at the time was the vice president and director of the Roper Elections Service. Local television news stations and even the larger regional metropolitan dailies were interested in the idea, he said, but they balked at the costs.

"The more exit polls the better," said Brennan, whose newspaper will conduct its own Election Day survey in California this November, and, in the past, has sponsored a national exit poll in presidential election years. "There is no way that it can be a bad thing to have alternatives."

## Print Media and Television: Different Polling Needs

To woo the *Post* and the *Times* away from VNS, Mitofsky offered the prospect for more editorial input as an incentive to sign up with his service. Both papers had long-standing ties to broadcast partners at VRS, participating in previous national exit polls with CBS and ABC, respectively. Yet, the networks have regularly paid most of the bills for VRS, and hence made most of the decisions regarding the design of the exit poll questionnaires. Sources at the *Post* and the *Times* said while VRS board members were responsive to their suggestions about the exit poll, ultimately the principals at VRS had different priorities. With their hourly deadlines, television places a premium on a survey form whose results can be quickly tabulated and interpreted. Newspapers, which often run most of their exit poll analysis on the Thursday after the election, are interested in having a survey that allows them to do more in-depth analysis on issues.

"When the networks combined forces, the newspapers became essentially subscribers to a service rather than partners in a research effort," Kagay said. "We could voice concerns to [our former partners at] ABC and they could be heard that way, but it's not like having your own voice heard," said a *Post* official. And there's always the natural tendency of journalistic organizations to resist giving control over information to any outside entity.

Mitofsky said that the opportunity to have more editorial control over the content

of the exit poll was the major reason why the two print powerhouses decided to buy at least some part of his service. Representatives from both papers said, with the above exception, they had been very satisfied with the overall quality of the VRS product.

## VNS / ENS Rivalry

Mitofsky admits that his service won't be as comprehensive as the networks'—he'll have a national survey to measure voters' attitudes about House races, and individual polls in ten states to cover the major Senate and gubernatorial races. The networks, on the other hand, will be conducting an exit poll in at least 40 states as well as a national survey.

But Mitofsky did predict that his state exit polls "are going to be better than theirs" because he would be able to customize his questionnaires to the dynamics of a statewide race, while the networks will be using a more standardized form. This assertion is strongly denied by Mitofsky's former colleagues, who admire his knowledge of exit polls but think his interpersonal skills are lacking.

Mitofsky also irritated VNS officials when he sent a letter to many of the old VRS exit poll subscribers last November, raising doubts about how well the new organization would work, at the same time he was pursuing discussions with VNS about staying on as a consultant. In the letter, he wrote that "there are significant changes taking place at VRS that you should know about... [which] may influence your decision about

working again with VRS versus participating in a new exit poll venture." He warned that "budget restrictions" could change the "statistical methods" employed by VRS, which Mitofsky himself had developed during his years there and at CBS. He also noted that several CBS/VRS employees who worked on the exit poll had left the organization.

Although CNN political director Tom Hannon said that he would have liked to see VNS retain Mitofsky's services as a consultant, he added, "I am confident that we have people in place who can provide us with the kind of exit polling that we need."

Other VNS members were less restrained in voicing their feelings about Mitofsky's conduct. "Obviously we were upset," said NBC director of elections and polling Mary L. Klette, a VNS board member. "In some ways he was trying to knock our credibility." In response, Mitofsky said, "What they didn't like about my letter is the fact that I said things, not that they were untrue, but that [VNS officials] didn't think people should know. I'm sorry they feel it's necessary to deal in personalities." Mitofsky said of his former VNS associates, "I think they are a wonderful group of competitors and I couldn't have chosen a better group if I tried."

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*James A. Barnes is the political correspondent for the National Journal*