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Why poll numbers can vary dramatically

By John Aldrich

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This year, seemingly more than any others in recent memory, the presidential candidates' poll standings not only change from day to day, but different polls give different results -- even when conducted at the same time.

How can this be so? Are polls reliable? If so, why do they vary so? If not, why do campaigns spend millions on them?

What pollsters measure is what we are thinking right now. Many know they support Bush or favor Kerry and never waver. Other voters, however, are paying only passing attention. So when statements and events favor Kerry-Edwards, they are inclined their way. Or when events turn to favor Bush-Cheney, so do some voters. While elite politics is heavily polarized, the public is, by and large, not so polarized -- not even on "hot button" issues like abortion or gay marriage, let alone difficult issues like what to do in Iraq and how to improve the economy.

The fact is, most people are not so deeply antagonistic to one side or the other or so vitally interested in campaign politics that they could not imagine voting one way or the other. Indeed, political scientists are often better able to predict election outcomes in the summer and early fall using the state of the economy than relying on how voters say they will vote "if the election were held today." The simple fact is that the election is not held on any September day.

That people are still deciding who to vote for is only one part of the answer to why polls can produce such different results.



Another reason is it is quite difficult to figure out who is likely to vote and who is not. If nearly everyone voted -- as, say, in Australia -- then missing the 5 percent of the public that fails to vote is not going to affect the poll results very much. But in the U.S., about half the respondents aren't going to vote. Getting that half right is very tricky, and can

make a big difference. You can ask people, but that is a terrible way to figure out who will vote because many more say they will vote than actually will. So pollsters try to develop predictions from other questions and that, too, is hard to do well.

Additionally, it's not easy to get responses these days. In the 1960s, Gallup and Harris polls were conducted face-to-face. Back then, when a persistent but very nice woman came to the door, truly interested in your thoughts, it was hard to say no. Today, almost no polls are conducted this way. Most polls are done by phone, and many people are hard to reach by phone. And, if reached by phone, it is much easier to refuse over the phone than in person. As a result, response rates have declined -- some would say plummeted -- which means all kinds of corrections need to be made to ensure a valid sample.

Add to that the uncertainty over which among those who eventually did answer the questions will actually vote, and there are lots of sources to explain why poll numbers vary.

Finally, we are asking a lot of the poll numbers. We want them accurate, and it is difficult to understand why some have the race as close as 1 to 3 points while others have Bush in the lead by as much as 7 points. To be sure, if the lead is 1 point, the race is essentially tied. If it is 7, that is a big lead. And, it is probably true that such a difference is "statistically significant" -- that is, differing by more than the + or - 3 point margin of error -- but note that it is just barely so (and maybe not even). Does Bush have 49 points or 53? -- well, that is just outside the 3-point range. Does Kerry have the support of 48 percent or 46 percent? That certainly is not outside the 3-point range. And yet, if it is 49-48, Bush has a 1-point lead. If it is 53-46, Bush has a 7-point lead.

For that reason, it is not at all hard for political scientists to see why a 1-point or a 7-point difference is not really a clear difference at all in polls -- let alone polls done weeks before we have a decision to make.

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