



Chapter 1

The Exit Poll Phenomenon

On election day in the United States, exit polls are the talk of the nation. Even before balloting has concluded, the media uses voters' responses about their electoral choices to project final results for a public eager for immediate information. Once votes have been tallied, media commentators from across the political landscape rely almost exclusively on exit polls to explain election outcomes. The exit polls show what issues were the most important in the minds of the voters. They identify how different groups in the electorate cast their ballots. They expose which character traits helped or hurt particular candidates. They even reveal voters' expectations of the government moving forward.

In the weeks and months that follow, exit polls are used time and again to give meaning to the election results. Newly elected officials rely on them to substantiate policy mandates they claim to have received from voters. Partisan pundits scrutinize them for successful and failed campaign strategies. Even political strategists use them to pinpoint key groups and issues that need to be won over to succeed in future elections.

Unfortunately, these same exit poll results are not easily accessible to members of the public interested in dissecting them. After appearing in the next day's newspapers or on a politically oriented website, they disappear quickly from sight as the election fades in prominence. Eventually, the exit polls are archived at universities where only subscribers are capable of retrieving the data. But nowhere is a complete set of biennial exit poll results available in an easy-to-use format for curious parties.

This book is intended to address this shortcoming. It is a resource for academics, journalists, and political observers alike who wish to explore the exit polls in order to understand the composition and vote choices of the active electorate during the past four decades. Inside, readers will find voters' responses to nearly three dozen questions asked repeatedly in the exit polls over time, including items tapping voters' demographic backgrounds, lifestyle choices, economic considerations, and political orientations. In addition, the book features the presidential and congressional

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preferences of voters possessing these characteristics, enabling readers to see the primary sources of Democratic and Republican support in these critical races.

The results of the exit polls are presented in three different ways to facilitate readers' understanding of them. Tables report the proportion of respondents selecting each response option available to them. Graphs permit visual inspection of trends in each question over time. Written interpretations guide readers through the intricacies of the tables and graphs.

Beyond reporting the longitudinal results of the exit poll questions, the book details a wealth of information about each question for every year it was asked, including the following:

- The exact wording of both the question and the response options
- The marginal distributions for each response option
- The presidential and congressional vote choices for each response option
- The number of respondents answering each question
- The margin of sampling error for population projections

The book also provides the technical details explaining how all the numbers were computed. It describes how questions were selected and response options were merged over time. It documents how missing responses were handled. And, it explains how to properly read each table and graph to avoid common misperceptions. In the process, it aims to make the information accessible to even the most numerically challenged reader.

We begin by providing an overview of media-sponsored exit polling in the remainder of this chapter. We outline the history of the exit polls, describing their development, growth, and controversies over the years. Next, we explain how exit polls are conducted, detailing each phase of their implementation from questionnaire design to sampling methods to interviewing protocols to analytic procedures. Finally, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of exit polls for understanding the composition and political preferences of the active electorate.

A History of Exit Polls

Exit polling developed in the 1960s out of a desire by journalists to explain voting results to their audiences. Over time, it transformed from a modest effort at CBS News to estimate the outcome of the 1967 Kentucky gubernatorial election into a multimillion-dollar operation sponsored by a consortium of television networks and designed to project race winners and explain the preferences of numerous voting groups. Along the way, it overcame technical malfunctions, internal squabbles, and erroneous calls to become the centerpiece of media coverage of the elections.

Prior Approaches to Explaining Voters' Choices

Historically, media outlets relied on preelection polls and precinct analysis to make sense of election outcomes. They offered insights into the voting behaviors of particular subgroups in the electorate. Unfortunately, both techniques had serious underlying methodological problems, capable of producing misleading conclusions about the composition and preferences of voters.

Preelection surveys typically sampled 1,000 to 1,500 adults nationwide about their backgrounds, issue positions, and candidate preferences in the last few weeks before an election. Although such surveys were administered close to election day, it often proved difficult for pollsters to differentiate respondents who indicated an intention to vote from those who would turn out to the polls. Worse, the ever-changing nature of the campaign made voting preferences susceptible to change until the moment ballots were cast. Compounding these challenges was the fact that the number of interviews completed, although seemingly large, was usually too small to enable analysis of many voter subgroups, particularly those that comprised less than a quarter of the active electorate, such as African American, Hispanic, or Jewish voters.

Another common approach used to understand election outcomes was precinct analysis. This involved identifying key precincts that were largely homogenous on a particular social or political characteristic and inferring the voting patterns of the group nationwide from their behavior in these jurisdictions. For example, analysts would identify precincts that were heavily African American and project the voting patterns of African Americans across the country. The problem was that the voting patterns of groups often varied across districts, at times, by considerable margins. For example, an analysis of African American precincts in the 1972 presidential election suggested that 13 percent of African Americans supported Republican nominee Richard Nixon, failing to capture the wide disparity in support of African Americans, ranging from 6 percent within inner-city precincts to 34 percent in wealthy suburban precincts.¹

The Beginnings of National Exit Polling

The elections unit at CBS News under the direction of Warren Mitofsky developed a method for forecasting elections and explaining outcomes that ameliorated the problems undermining pre-election polling and precinct analysis. They randomly selected precincts from across a jurisdiction and interviewed select voters as they left polling stations. Although they were not the first pollsters to survey exiting voters—evidence indicates that this had been done as far back as the 1940s²—they were the first to use probabilistic sampling techniques so that their results could be inferred to the active electorate with a certain degree of confidence.³

The inspiration behind CBS's exit polling efforts surfaced in 1967.⁴ The elections unit wanted a method for projecting election results before the full returns came in, either because of delays in acquiring information on sample precincts or varied poll closing times. George Fine, head of the market research company that assisted CBS in hiring field staff, suggested interviewing voters as they left the polling booth, citing the valuable feedback that exiting moviegoers had provided a film company with which he worked. Warren Mitofsky was drawn to the idea and, together with his CBS colleague Murray Edelman and statistician Joe Waksberg of the U.S. Census Bureau, developed a probabilistic method for selecting a sample of precincts across a jurisdiction and intercepting a subset of voters after they left the polls. They applied the approach to the 1967 Kentucky gubernatorial election with great success, making the first on-air prediction using information derived, in part, from an exit poll. The exit poll had proven far more consistent with the outcome of the election than a same-day telephone poll or an analysis of key precincts.

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Building on their success, CBS expanded its efforts to twenty states in 1968. Again, though, the exit polls (which were limited to vote choice, gender, and race) were used only to facilitate projections in presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial races. Although the thought of scrutinizing exit poll responses to understand the outcome of the election had arisen, there simply were not the technological means to immediately transmit individual responses collected in remote precincts to a centralized computer for analysis.

These logistical problems were worked out by the 1970 election, enabling CBS to administer a lengthier series of demographic questions to voters in a number of states and provide on-air analysis of them on election night. The network could now describe the voting patterns of key groups in these states, providing valuable insights to its viewers. Two years later, CBS cast an even wider net and conducted its first national exit poll of voters in select precincts across the contiguous United States.

By the 1984 presidential election, all three major networks and the *Los Angeles Times* were conducting independent, nationwide exit polls. They each crafted their own questionnaires, designed their own sampling methodology to select precincts and voters, and developed their own weighting procedures to ensure the representativeness of their findings.⁵ Nonetheless, they were producing results similar to both each other and the actual outcome.

Table 1.1 shows the proportions of voters in several different demographic groups who chose Ronald Reagan for president in 1984 across each of the media-sponsored, national exit polls. Despite varying methodological approaches, the network exit polls produced comparable findings. In most subgroups, the difference in Republican vote choice across the polls did not exceed the margin of error.⁶

Initially, exit poll results were used simply to analyze election outcomes, providing context for actual vote counts. The networks soon realized, though, that exit polls could be used to project election results in advance of the returns and give them a leg up on the competition during election day. In 1980, NBC projected Reagan the winner of the presidential election at 8:15 p.m. This early call set off a storm of criticism because it occurred before the polls had closed in many western states, and with little more than 5 percent of the actual ballots tabulated.⁷ Congressional hearings were held in Washington to look into the impact of early calls on turnout in late-closing precincts, and legislation was proposed, though never passed, to adopt uniform poll closing times.⁸

Despite the indignation, the other television networks followed suit quickly. All three networks used national exit poll results to project congressional races in the 1982 midterm elections. In 1984, all the networks called the winner of the presidential election between 8:00 and 8:30 p.m.

By the end of the 1980s, exit polling had become very expensive and yielded little competitive advantage. The networks spent millions of dollars each election cycle to hire thousands of temporary workers to gather the questionnaires and then compile and analyze the results.⁹ They were competing for an on-air advantage that had shrunk from hours to a matter of minutes. As a result, the networks commenced talks after the 1988 presidential election to find ways to pool their efforts and fund a single exit poll.

Table 1.1 Ronald Reagan’s Share of the 1984 Presidential Vote across Exit Polls

Demographic	CBS- <i>New York Times</i>	ABC	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Male	61%	62%	63%
Female	57%	54%	56%
18–29	58%	57%	60%
30–59	59%	58%	59%
60+	63%	57%	60%
White	66%	63%	67%
Black	9%	11%	9%
Hispanic/Latino	33%	44%	47%
Catholic	55%	56%	59%
Jewish	32%	31%	32%
Democrat	26%	24%	16%
Independent	63%	61%	67%
Republican	92%	94%	97%
Liberal	29%	25%	32%
Moderate	54%	50%	59%
Conservative	81%	81%	82%

Source: “Exit Polls Agree on Who Voted for Whom,” *National Journal* 16 (1984): 2271.

The idea to share identical exit poll information sparked considerable debate. Critics raised concerns about projections and analysis deriving from a single source.¹⁰ In the past, the polls had served as a check on each other and offered some assurances that the results were accurate. Worse, if a single entity ran into problems, the networks might have to wait hours or even days for actual votes to be tabulated before they could speak about the results.

Cost savings won out, though, leading CNN and the three major networks to form a consortium in 1990—Voter Research and Surveys (VRS)—to oversee a cooperative exit poll unit, similar to the National Election Service, a joint network venture that had been created in 1964 to compile precinct vote counts for the networks.¹¹ Warren Mitofsky was named to oversee the unit, which eventually hired 6,000 employees to administer exit polls across the nation. VRS was charged with projecting winners, whereas the networks were left to interpret the causes of the outcome. Network competition had shifted from forecasting to analysis.

Problems with Projections and Partisan Skew

Unfortunately, the consortium confronted various challenges from the outset. In the 1990 mid-term election, the computer program designed to process and weight the results malfunctioned, leaving numerous media outlets scrambling to explain the results. VRS attempted to correct the problem quickly by crafting a simpler weighting scheme, but it did not fully account for all the sampling considerations.¹² This method resulted in several questionable anomalies, such as a high Republican share of the black vote, which were not easily explained by political observers.¹³ It

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was not until much later, when the election was well in the past, that programming errors were fixed and the results fell more in line with expectations.

In 1992, two problems came to the forefront that would burden exit-polling efforts for much of the next two decades. First, in accordance with their contract, VRS provided subscribers with early survey results by 1 p.m. to help media outlets develop storylines and organize their presentations. Mitofsky emphasized repeatedly that these results were preliminary and susceptible to change over the course of the day, warning that “looking at an exit poll halfway through the day is like announcing the final score of a football game at halftime.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, commentators characterized the races based on these early indicators, hinting at the outcomes in ways that appeared more definitive than they actually were. Worse, reporters leaked this supposedly embargoed information to friends, colleagues, and even the campaigns themselves, setting off both premature celebrations and handwringing across the political spectrum.

Second, and far more troublesome for the reputation of the exit polls, the preliminary exit poll results showed a partisan skew. They overstated Bill Clinton’s share of the vote by 2.5 points in the 1992 presidential race and understated George H. W. Bush’s share by 2.5 points, giving the impression that Clinton won by a far greater margin than the officially tabulated votes indicated.¹⁵ The raw exit poll data had never been deemed “accurate” in the past prior to being weighted to the actual results, but with the release of early results, observable, but correctable, sampling errors gave the impression that the numbers were “off.”¹⁶

VRS claimed the Democratic overstatement in the raw exit poll data was due to partisan differences in the willingness of voters to complete the exit poll, not to a poor selection of precincts or differential response rates by age, race, or gender. Republicans simply refused to participate at the same rates as Democrats, resulting in there being fewer Republicans in the raw exit poll results than there should have been. Mitofsky speculated that the disparity was due to different intensities of support for the candidates—Democratic voters were just more excited about voting for Clinton than Republican voters were about voting for Bush and, as a result, were more motivated to communicate this message by filling out the exit poll questionnaire; others thought it was due to Republicans in general having less confidence in the mass media.¹⁷

Despite the source of the partisan bias in the raw results, the exit polls were able to characterize accurately the voting patterns of demographic subgroups and partisan constituencies once they were weighted to match the official returns. The problem was that the data could not be corrected until the official results began coming in. As a result, the exit polls were susceptible to inaccurate vote projections on election night, especially early in the evening right after poll closings. Nonetheless, the cautious analysts at VRS still called all the races correctly in the 1992 election.

In 1993, VRS merged with the other related media consortium, the National Election Service, to save money.¹⁸ The expanded unit was named the Voter News Service (VNS) and partnered the Associated Press (AP) with CBS, ABC, NBC, and CNN to oversee the provision of exit polls and vote counts (Fox News would join in 1996). Mitofsky, however, was unhappy with the new management structure. He left to form a new exit poll company, Mitofsky International, to compete directly with VNS.¹⁹ Mitofsky International quickly peeled away several high-profile subscribers—including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—that sought to have

greater input in the design of questionnaires than they had at VNS. Murray Edelman, Mitofsky's second in command at CBS News and VRS, stepped in as editorial director at VNS.

This change in structure coincided with the reemergence of competitive race calling among the networks. In the prior two election cycles, the networks had deferred to VRS, waiting for them to project a winner before calling the race on the air. In the 1994 congressional elections, ABC News decided to form its own decision desk, comprised of polling experts and statisticians, to expedite the analysis and interpretations of the VNS projection models.²⁰ On election night, ABC accurately called a number of prominent races well ahead of their competitors. This success prompted the other networks to assemble their own decision desks. By 1996, all the networks were again calling winners in each state, at times well ahead of the VNS projections, which relied on far more conservative statistical models.

The 2000 Election Debacle

Network competition to call winners culminated in the disastrous 2000 presidential election, when these systems of race projections broke down, and the networks wound up retracting their calls for the winner in Florida and presumptively the election, not once, but twice on election night. The trouble began early in the evening, when VNS alerted the networks around 7:50 p.m. that their statistical models predicted Al Gore the winner in Florida and that the networks should consider calling the state for Gore.²¹ This prediction took place even though only 4 percent of the actual vote had been counted and numerous precincts in the Florida panhandle, which happened to be in the central time zone, remained open until 8 p.m.²² Less than ten minutes later, the decision desks at all the networks and the AP agreed with VNS and announced Gore the winner in Florida.

Over the next hour-and-a-half, VNS discovered that vote-count data from Duval County had been entered incorrectly, making Gore appear as if he had many more votes than he actually did. After fixing this error, the statistical models used by VNS and decision desks at all the networks showed the race could no longer be projected safely for either candidate. By 10:18 p.m., all the networks announced they were moving the state back to the undecided category, prompting Jeff Greenfield of CNN to quip, "Oh waiter, one order of crow."²³

The networks continued to track the actual vote tallies in Florida over the next several hours. They showed a consistent Bush lead but not one large enough to give any of the decision desks enough confidence to project him as the winner. With 97 percent of the precincts reporting, Bush's 50,000 vote lead finally appeared insurmountable to the networks.²⁴ At 2:15 a.m., Fox News called Florida and the presidency for Bush. Within five minutes, NBC, CNN, CBS, and ABC followed suit, announcing that Bush would be the forty-third president of the United States. Meanwhile, VNS and the AP chose not to call the race in Florida a second time, wary of the volatility in the data with the contest that close.²⁵

During the next couple hours, new errors were discovered. VNS had underestimated the number of votes remaining to be counted. Two counties—Volusia and Brevard—had mistakenly entered their vote totals in favor of Bush. Once these mistakes were corrected, the race narrowed considerably, so much so that Bush's lead was inside the margin of error.²⁶ Around 4 a.m., one by one the networks began retracting their calls in Florida for Bush, announcing that a recount

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would be necessary to resolve the winner in the state as well as the race for the presidency. For many newspapers, though, it was too late and numerous morning editions featured headlines announcing Bush as the next president.²⁷ An embarrassment early in the evening had turned to a humiliation by the end, leading NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw to remark, “We don’t just have egg on our face; we have an omelet.”²⁸ Despite the resulting indignation, the exit polls were not responsible for the erroneous second call. In fact, the exit polls were at that point no longer part of the estimation models, having been replaced by actual vote counts—incorrect as they were in some cases—over the course of the evening.²⁹

New Crises and Controversies

After the election, VNS commissioned the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to conduct an independent analysis of their data collection techniques and estimation models.³⁰ RTI found that VNS’s sampling methods were sound and well designed for estimating the vote. However, they questioned VNS’s projected winner formula and standard error calculations, arguing that VNS should make greater use of prior data. Of particular concern was that VNS had used only a single race to gauge past precinct turnout and vote preference in their projected winner formula. RTI also contended that the VNS models did not sufficiently account for early/absentee votes, pointing out that these votes accounted for 12 percent of the actual total vote in 2000 compared to the 7 percent assumed by the VNS models.³¹ Finally, RTI thought that VNS could do more to verify incoming information and check for errors in the data.

As a result of this investigation, VNS overhauled their entire system for making projections, redesigning many aspects of the operation from scratch.³² They modernized their computer hardware and updated their software. They redesigned their projected winner models, making greater use of past votes, revising weighting schemes, and developing new sampling error computations. They expanded the number of states in which they conducted preelection surveys of early/absentee voters and updated models estimating the share of the early/absentee vote received by each candidate. They also installed new quality control procedures, such as error correction notifications, to alert decision desks of significant corrections in turnout counts or vote tallies. Nearly all of these innovations, though, pertained to the procedures for determining a winner of a state on election night and not to the quality of the exit poll data.

Unfortunately, VNS did not have adequate time to fully test the new system. On election night 2002, the new computer system failed to properly integrate and analyze information imported from precincts around the country. Vote counts were processed so slowly that some of the networks stopped using them and turned to other sources, such as the AP, which was running a backup operation. Worse, VNS was unable to supply exit poll data to any of their clients that evening, leaving media outlets scrambling for explanations for the outcome. VNS claimed that fewer exit poll interviews were reported than expected at various planned intervals, making the results too unreliable for them to be confident in their accuracy.³³

This was the final straw for the media partners in the consortium. In January 2003, VNS was disbanded, leaving the networks once again looking for an efficient and effective way to conduct exit polls.³⁴ Considering the complexity of the task, though, few options were available. Later

that month, the major networks agreed to join forces again, creating the National Election Pool (NEP) to oversee the administration of a single, joint exit poll. NEP hired Edison Research, which had served as the backup system for CNN in the 2002 election, and Mitofsky International, to conduct the exit polls. Edison/Mitofsky would make projections, but each network would be responsible for the calls they made on the air.³⁵

Despite the elimination of VNS and the changes made under NEP, the exit polls ran into major headaches again in 2004. Edison/Mitofsky did not make any incorrect projections on election day. However, the partisan skew in the measure of aggregate vote choice was higher than in previous elections. The preliminary data overstated the difference in the George W. Bush-John Kerry vote on election night by 5.5 percentage points, predicting a 51- to 48-percent advantage for Kerry rather than a 50.5- to 48-percent win for Bush.³⁶ This was the highest error in the preliminary results since the 1992 election and double the error found in the previous two presidential elections.

The discrepancy between the preliminary exit poll findings and the final election results was even greater in the competitive states. The exit polls predicted a Kerry victory in four states—Ohio, Iowa, New Mexico, and Nevada—in which Bush won, and overstated Kerry's support by 11 percentage points in Ohio, 9 points in Pennsylvania, and 8 points in Florida.³⁷ Considering the closeness of the election, the exit polls seemed to suggest that Kerry was capable of winning the 2004 election.

Political observers used these differences between the preliminary exit polls and the final results to support allegations of vote rigging and fraud in precincts deploying electronic voting machines, particularly in Ohio, where the state's twenty-seven electoral votes, enough to change the winner of the Electoral College from Bush to Kerry, was decided by 118,775 ballots.³⁸ Steven Freeman of the University of Pennsylvania calculated the odds of the exit polls in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida being as far off the final outcome as they were as 662,000 to 1.³⁹ The National Election Data Archive, a nonpartisan group of mathematicians and statisticians promoting election reform, found that twenty-two of the forty-nine precincts in Ohio polled by Edison/Mitofsky had reported Kerry vote share results that had less than a 5 percent chance of occurring, based on the state's exit polls.⁴⁰ Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., even used the exit polls as the basis for holding congressional hearings on vote irregularities in Ohio.⁴¹

Edison/Mitofsky disputed these charges in a follow-up report, contending that precincts with electronic voting had virtually the same rates of error as those using punch card systems.⁴² They again attributed the bias to within-precinct error—error due to a systematic bias in the selection of voters within a precinct—and not to bias in the selection of precincts themselves. Bush voters were more likely to refuse to participate in the exit polls than Kerry voters. They hypothesized that the result was a function of the disproportionate numbers of interviewers under age thirty-five who administered the exit poll. Young people had more problems securing participation from voters than older respondents, perhaps because they were correctly perceived to have been more likely to have voted for Kerry.

Edison/Mitofsky also found that voting patterns within electoral groups were accurate once they were weighted to the official results. They found no evidence that the distribution of presidential vote choices within various demographic groups was biased, despite the vote choice of exit poll respondents overall overstating Democratic support.⁴³ Table 1.2 shows how the presidential

Table 1.2 Comparison of Composition and Presidential Vote Choice in the 2004 National Exit Polls

Demographic	NEP National Exit Poll		<i>Los Angeles Times</i> National Exit Poll		Difference between Polls (NEP– <i>Los Angeles Times</i>)	
	% of Respondents	% Voting for Bush	% of Respondents	% Voting for Bush	% of Respondents	% Voting for Bush
Male	46%	55%	49%	53%	–3%	2%
Female	54%	48%	51%	49%	3%	–1%
Married Men	30%	60%	31%	59%	–1%	1%
Single Men	16%	45%	16%	40%	0%	5%
Married Women	32%	55%	30%	57%	2%	–2%
Single Women	22%	37%	19%	35%	3%	2%
18–29	17%	45%	20%	43%	–3%	2%
30–44	29%	53%	32%	52%	–3%	1%
45–64	38%	52%	36%	54%	2%	–2%
65 or Older	16%	52%	12%	55%	4%	–3%
White	77%	58%	79%	57%	–2%	1%
Black	11%	11%	10%	14%	1%	–3%
Hispanic/Latino	8%	44%	5%	45%	3%	–1%
Asian	2%	44%	3%	34%	–1%	10%
Protestant	54%	59%	51%	61%	3%	–2%
Catholic	27%	52%	25%	55%	2%	–3%
Jewish	3%	25%	4%	26%	–1%	–1%
Weekly Religious Attender	41%	61%	42%	65%	–1%	–4%
Less Than Weekly Attender	54%	44%	58%	42%	–4%	2%
Own Guns	41%	63%	36%	65%	5%	–2%
Do Not Own Guns	59%	43%	64%	43%	–5%	0%
First-Time Voter	11%	46%	11%	42%	0%	4%
Voted Before	89%	51%	89%	53%	0%	–2%
Union Households	24%	40%	27%	43%	–3%	–3%
Not Union Households	76%	55%	73%	54%	3%	1%
Heterosexual	96%	53%	96%	53%	0%	0%
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual	4%	23%	4%	17%	0%	6%

Source: Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International, “Evaluation of Edison/Mitofsky Election System 2004,” 2005, pp. 63–64, www.ap.org/media/pdf/evaluationedisonmitofsky.pdf.

preferences of various demographic groups in the 2004 NEP national exit poll compared to the national exit poll conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*. For almost every group, there is virtually no difference in their size or presidential vote choice.

In the aftermath of the 2004 election, Edison/Mitofsky announced they would make several changes to address these issues. They committed to hiring interviewers from a broader age range and to training them more intensely in an effort to diminish the apparent differences in response rates among supporters of different candidates. Moreover, they would not release any results from the exit polls prior to 6 p.m. eastern time.⁴⁴

Since 2004, less controversy has surrounded the exit polls. No serious technical problems have surfaced during the last three elections, enabling the media to prepare analyses of the outcome in a timely manner. Leaks of early wave findings have been contained. The preliminary exit polls have continued to overstate support for Democratic candidates; however, the final vote counts have had such large winning margins that the projected outcomes were no different.

How Exit Polls Work

Conducting national exit polls in the United States is an enormous undertaking, requiring as long as two years to implement. The goal of the process is to collect information on a subset of voters that can be projected to the entire active electorate with a high degree of confidence. Numerous obstacles, though, stand in the way, threatening to undermine the effort and bias the results.

Exit polls, like most surveys, unfold in four distinct but often overlapping stages.⁴⁵ Researchers usually begin by developing procedures for drawing a probabilistic sample of voters whose responses can be inferred to the active electorate with a high degree of confidence. They develop a questionnaire, capable of both describing the types of voters participating in an election as well as offering insights into the reasoning behind their choices. Interviewers are trained and eventually employed to disseminate the questionnaires to and collect them from sampled voters on election day. The process concludes with the integration of voters' responses into a data set for analysis. The specific procedures used for each stage vary by polling organization; therefore, we focus our discussion on those procedures developed by Warren Mitofsky, Murray Edelman, and their colleagues at CBS and used by the polling units employed by the network consortium to conduct the last four national exit polls.

Sampling

The first stage of the exit polling process centers on selecting a subset of voters to whom the questionnaire will be administered. To make valid inferences to the active electorate, a sample needs to be drawn that ensures every voter has some chance of being selected. Systematically excluding certain voters can bias the data collected and distort generalization to the active electorate.⁴⁶ At the same time, though, a representative sample of the active electorate requires a demographic mix of voters from across the states as well as across regions within a state, a challenging feat for pollsters relying solely on simple random sampling methods, whereby each voter has the same probability of being selected.

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To reduce the threat of coverage error and to ensure that obvious subgroups in the population (for example, geographic regions) are represented, exit pollsters undertake a two-stage sampling process. The first stage involves choosing a subset of precincts from around the country. The second stage centers on interviewing a group of voters in each of the selected precincts. If sampling is done correctly, all voters nationwide will have a chance of being selected, and the responses of those interviewed can be used to make probabilistic inferences about the active electorate.

Selection of Precincts. National exit pollsters choose precincts by taking stratified probability samples in each of the states before drawing a national subsample from the state samples. This process involves sorting the precincts in each state into different categories or strata to guarantee that particular groups are represented adequately. To begin, precincts in each state are initially grouped into two strata according to their size to ensure the selection of smaller precincts.⁴⁷ Within each of these size strata, precincts are categorized by geographic region, usually between three to five regions in each state. For each state geographic region, precincts are ordered by their percentage vote for one of the major political parties in a previous election. Precincts are sampled from these strata with probabilities proportionate to the total votes cast in them in a prior election, so that every precinct has as many chances of being picked by pollsters as it has voters. The samples drawn in each state are then combined, and a national sample of precincts is selected from them using a previous presidential race to determine the relative number of precincts chosen from each state.

Typically, the total number of precincts selected in the national exit poll is between 250 and 300. Ultimately, the number of precincts chosen represents a tradeoff between sampling error and financial constraints. Research by Edison/Mitofsky has shown that the number of precincts selected has not been responsible for the Democratic overstatements that have continually appeared in the exit polls.⁴⁸ For example, they found that for the 2004 election the actual distribution of the presidential vote in the precincts used in the exit poll samples did not differ significantly from the actual vote distribution nationwide. In fact, these precincts overstated support for the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, but only by 0.4 points, on average, across the states.

Selection of Individual Voters. Within each precinct, interviewers are instructed to count all the voters exiting a sampled precinct and interview every n th voter.⁴⁹ The interviewing rate usually varies between every voter and one out of every ten voters depending on the size and expected turnout in each precinct. It is typically structured to ensure that interviewers collect responses from approximately a hundred voters over the course of the day.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the process, it is fraught with challenges. It can be difficult for interviewers to get close enough to polling places to intercept voters effectively. A number of states have imposed laws prohibiting pollsters from getting within a certain distance of polling places. Typically, these distance requirements have been between 50 and 300 feet, although, in the most extreme case, Hawaii forbade interviewers from getting within 1,000 feet. The news media have repeatedly brought lawsuits to overturn these efforts. To date, the courts have always sided on behalf of the media, ruling that such laws violate the First Amendment rights of the media to

access newsworthy information.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, some restrictions remain. In the 2004 election, roughly 12 percent of interviewers reported having to stand more than 50 feet away from a polling location and 3 percent said they had to stand more than 100 feet away.⁵¹

Even when interviewers can get sufficiently close to a polling place, voters can still elude exit pollsters. Sometimes polling places contain multiple entry points, making it difficult to maintain an accurate count of voters. Other times, it can be challenging to intercept voters who are moving too quickly or exiting as part of a crowd. All told, about one in ten voters chosen for the sample are nonetheless missed by interviewers and therefore contribute no information.⁵²

Finally, intercepted voters can refuse to complete the questionnaire. Voters refuse for a variety of reasons, including lack of interest or time, weather, concerns about privacy or media objectivity, or the demographic characteristics of the interviewer (for example, voters are less likely to respond to younger interviewers). The proportion of refusals varies by precinct, but typically it occurs in roughly a third of voters in the sample.⁵³

Refusal rates, or for that matter miss rates, are not necessarily problematic, as long as the propensity of different groups to participate does not vary. However, if one group is more or less likely than other groups to complete exit surveys, their responses will be over- or underrepresented, thereby biasing estimates for the overall electorate. For example, the partisan overstatement repeatedly found in the national exit polls over the past several decades appears to be due to the greater willingness of Democratic voters to complete the exit polls, compared with their Republican counterparts. However, once this discrepancy has been corrected by weighting the exit polls to correspond with the actual vote, there has been no evidence that the vote estimates within groups are biased.

Nonetheless, the network exit polling organizations have undertaken a number of measures to reduce the threat posed by nonresponse. They have recruited interviewers with characteristics that correlate with higher response rates, such as prior survey interviewing experience and older age. They have emphasized training to better educate interviewers on how to handle evasive voters. Most important, they have imposed strict protocols for cases in which the voters intended to participate are either missed or refuse to complete the questionnaire. Interviewers are first instructed to record the *n*th voter's sex, race, and approximate age. This information allows the data to be adjusted for differential nonresponse on these three observable characteristics. Interviewers then commence the count again, selecting the *n*th voter. They are instructed not to substitute the *n*th voter with a more easily accessible alternative. If this procedure is performed correctly, the probability structure underlying voter selection will be maintained.

Accounting for Early/Absentee Voters. Some voters do not go to the polls in person on election day, casting ballots in advance by mail or at designated locations. Historically, citizens living overseas, deployed by the military, or away at school were permitted to mail an absentee ballot to the precinct containing their permanent residence. In recent years, a growing number of states have permitted all registrants to vote prior to election day, regardless of their rationale, in an effort to stimulate participation. Some states, such as Oregon, permit voters to mail their early/

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absentee ballots, whereas others require voters to submit early/absentee ballots at designated on-site locations. By the 2010 election, as many as a third of the ballots cast by voters were done by means other than going to an election day polling station.⁵⁴

National exit pollsters account for early/absentee voting by conducting telephone surveys in states where the rates of early voting are highest. VNS first incorporated early/absentee voting in 1996, surveying voters in California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. By 2008, NEP was conducting telephone surveys in eighteen states, including Oregon, Washington, and Colorado, where the proportions of early voting were so high that no in-person exit polls were conducted on election day.

The telephone surveys are contracted out to different survey centers that administer them during the last week before the election. Respondents are chosen through random digit dialing. Because of the increased use of cell phones over the past few years, the exit polls now include cell and landline phone numbers in their samples. Respondents who indicate that they have already voted or intend to do so before election day are interviewed. They are administered essentially the same questionnaires as those given to exiting voters on election day. After a designated number of interviews have been conducted (usually based on the expected ratio of early/absentee to election day on-site voting), the data are weighted to reflect the probabilities of selection as well as key demographic characteristics in the state (such as race, age, and education).

On election day, the results from the absentee/early voter telephone surveys are combined with the on-site exit polls. Each group is then weighted in proportion to its contribution to the overall vote. When projecting the vote during election night, these weights are based on an estimate of their relative influence. After the election, the exit polls and absentee/early voter telephone surveys are forced to the proportions of the actual vote totals that they comprised in their respective states.

Questionnaire Design

The exit questionnaires are designed by representatives from each of the networks in the consortium. They typically contain twenty-five to forty questions, many of which are carried over from past election years. To allow a greater number of questions, multiple versions of the surveys are usually administered, typically four in presidential election years and two in midterm election years (see Table 1.3). Each version contains both a unique and a common set of questions. The versions are interleaved on pads that can be removed sequentially by interviewers. After the surveys are returned, the versions are combined into a single data set for analysis.

The content of the questions covers a range of topics, including respondents' vote choices, physical traits, religious characteristics, lifestyle choices, political orientations, economic considerations, issue positions, and candidate evaluations. All the questions are close-ended, save those on vote choice, which provide space for respondents to write in candidates whom they selected but who were not amongst the options provided. Most questions contain two to four response options, including well-known scales such as ideological identification and presidential approval, which are truncated to three or four choices. Efforts are made to retain similar, if not identical, wording for questions on topics asked repeatedly over time.

Table 1.3 Number of Respondents in Each Version of the CBS/VRS/VNS/NEP Exit Poll, 1972–2010

Year	Version 1	Version 2	Version 3	Version 4	Total
1972	17,595				17,595
1976	15,300				15,300
1978	8,808				8,808
1980	15,201				15,201
1982	7,855				7,855
1984	9,174				9,174
1986	8,994				8,994
1988	11,645				11,645
1990	10,565	9,323			19,888
1992	4,416	4,137	3,920	3,017	15,490
1994	5,742	5,566			11,308
1996	4,185	4,203	4,146	4,103	16,637
1998	5,747	5,640			11,387
2000	3,323	3,321	3,328	3,253	13,225
2002	9,095	8,777			17,872
2004	3,666	3,324	3,300	3,429	13,719
2006	7,008	6,858			13,866
2008	4,508	4,525	4,609	4,376	18,018
2010	4,623	4,725	4,635	4,149	18,132

Source: National exit polls. See the section in Chapter 2 entitled “Creating a Cumulative National Data Set: Selecting Exit Polls” (pp. 28–29).

Some exit poll questionnaires are translated into Spanish. Voters in precincts where Hispanics comprise at least 20 percent of the population are given the option of completing the exit poll in English or Spanish. In the 2010 election, eight states contained precincts offering a Spanish version of the questionnaire.

Despite the apparent straightforwardness of constructing exit poll questionnaires, the process presents a number of challenges to pollsters as they attempt to design an instrument in which every solicited voter will complete every question on the survey. For example, researchers have long debated questionnaire length. Longer questionnaires can yield more data about individuals, but fewer people want to complete them. Today, exit pollsters balance this tradeoff by limiting questionnaires to the front and back of a single sheet of paper.

Pollsters also weigh how to handle respondents who fail to complete any of the questions on the back side of the questionnaire. Typically, 3 to 5 percent of respondents leave the entire back side blank, despite reminders by interviewers to complete both sides. A number of questions placed at the end tend to be of great importance, covering key demographic variables such as household income, education, religious affiliation, and party identification. Exit pollsters use the information provided on the front side even if respondents do not answer any of the questions on the back side.

Finally, exit pollsters debate how to interpret individual questions skipped by respondents. An unanswered question could mean a respondent missed it inadvertently, was unsure how to answer it, could not find an acceptable response from among the options provided, or intentionally chose

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to skip it. This problem was exacerbated during the 1980s and early 1990s when exit pollsters included lists of characteristics at the end of the questionnaire and instructed respondents to check all that applied. National exit polls treat unanswered demographic questions as missing data and do not include them in the marginals and cross-tabulations provided to the network consortium on election night. Unanswered attitudinal questions, though, are interpreted as “don’t know” responses for the purposes of election day analyses, unless they occur on a back side that is completely unanswered, in which case they are treated as missing data, as well.

Interviewing

Exit questionnaires are disseminated by contracted interviewers at precincts across the country on election day. One interviewer is typically assigned to each precinct, although sometimes more than one interviewer is deployed in precincts deemed unsafe or anticipating high turnout. They are tasked with distributing and collecting exit poll surveys as well as collecting information on voter turnout and nonresponse.

Interviewers are recruited from across the country, primarily through job postings at various career centers and websites and through the recommendations of former exit poll interviewers. Their training unfolds in three phases. During the hiring call, interviewers are given an overview of the exit poll process as well as their particular responsibilities. Interviewers are then mailed instructions and a training video describing the procedures for intercepting voters, administering the questionnaire, and tallying misses, refusals, and overall turnout. Finally, interviewers participate in telephone rehearsals to ensure that they understand all aspects of the job.⁵⁵

On election day, interviewers arrive at their assigned precincts when the polls open. After checking in with their supervisor, they make voting officials aware of their presence and where they intend to station themselves to conduct interviews. Interviewers attempt to stand as close to the precinct exits as possible. If voting officials attempt to prevent them from performing their task or distance them too far from the exits to be effective, they contact supervisors to attempt to resolve the situation.⁵⁶

Interviewers approach the voters defined by their designated interviewing rates, introducing themselves and describing what is necessary to complete the exit poll. Their pitch typically includes assurances that the questionnaire can be completed quickly and confidentially. A badge identifying themselves as members of the consortium conducting the exit polls is worn to legitimize their request.

Once voters agree to participate, interviewers give them a pencil and a paper questionnaire affixed to a clipboard. Respondents self-administer the questions and complete the survey privately, typically standing a short distance from the interviewer. When they are finished, they fold the questionnaires and slip them through an opening in a closed box to ensure that their identities and answers remain confidential.

Interviewers take a short break every hour to tabulate responses. At three times during the day—late morning, midafternoon, and just before the polls shut down—interviewers call in to a centralized computing system the results of the exit poll as well as information on voters who were missed or failed to respond. During these breaks throughout the day, and after the

precinct closes, interviewers attempt to secure actual turnout numbers and vote returns from precinct officials.

Analysis of the Results

A centralized computing system receives exit poll results, completion rates, and turnout information from interviewers during election day. It tabulates the survey responses to each question across all precincts in a given electoral jurisdiction and weights the results to account for various sampling considerations. The findings are then integrated with cumulative precinct tallies of turnout and vote returns into various projection models to estimate vote totals for each candidate. This information is sent to the decision desks of the consortium members, who use them to “call” winners in various races and offer explanations of the outcomes.

The weights applied to the exit polls adjust for three different sampling considerations.⁵⁷ Initially, respondents are weighted for their probability of selection within a given precinct. This probability hinges on how many people voted overall in the precinct and the composition of voters who failed to respond. Both must be projected, at least initially, with the best available information. During the course of the day, interviewers provide turnout numbers based on their own counts or those provided by precinct election officials. Later in the process, as the actual final turnout figures become more available, they replace any remaining interviewers’ estimates, often altering the weight in the process.

Respondents’ probabilities of selection also hinge on the composition of voters. For example, the likelihood of selecting a female voter depends in part on the proportion of female voters who participated. Estimation of this ratio requires information on all voters in the sample, not just those who completed the survey. Interviewers are instructed to track the sex, race, and age of voters who were missed or chose not to participate. The frequency distribution of nonresponders is then compared to responders to determine if a discrepancy exists. If so, the data are adjusted to account for any of these discrepancies. However, nonresponse bias stemming from other nonobservable characteristics is not and cannot be corrected because interviewers have no way of identifying the attribute from afar. For example, because pollsters do not know the party identification of those who refuse to participate in the exit poll, the weight cannot account for nonresponse bias based on partisanship.

Also, exit poll results are weighted by the probability of precinct selection. Precincts within a state are adjusted to match their relative size in the state’s active electorate. The exit poll results are then weighted to modify each state’s contribution so that it matches the state’s relative contribution to the election.

Finally, exit poll results are forced to the official turnout and the vote share given to the respective candidates in each precinct. This final adjustment is designed to correct for obvious sampling error in the exit polls that was not remedied when the probability of respondent and precinct selection was taken into account. This generates a data set that offers the greatest likelihood of understanding the electorate’s voting patterns. The assumption underlying this weighting is that the officially reported vote counts are a valid representation of the ballots cast in an election. In recent years, this correction has been controversial, as some observers have argued

that it obscures evidence of vote fraud. Such accusations, of course, presume that the exit polls are precise estimates of the actual vote and not the other way around. The nature of opinion polls, whereby survey error is ever present, and the history of the exit polls themselves, in which they have yielded a persistent Democratic overstatement in presidential vote choice, make this unlikely.⁵⁸

Advantages and Disadvantages of Exit Polls

National exit polls possess numerous advantages over their chief counterparts—preelection and postelection telephone surveys—for understanding the composition and vote choices of the active electorate.⁵⁹ Certainly, trends about *likely voters*' opinions drawn from standard public opinion surveys exist in our poll-saturated contemporary environment. Yet, compared to exit polls, standard public opinion surveys are less well suited to examine *voters*' attitudes and behaviors.

First and foremost, the exit polls are distinct in that they contact actual voters immediately after they depart polling locations across the nation. Because standard public opinion polls, such as the American National Election Study or Gallup Poll, do not capture respondents as they depart the voting booth, these standard surveys often fail to correctly identify voters from nonvoters.⁶⁰ These surveys are not even conducted on election day, but rather in the weeks and months preceding or following the election. As a result, individuals may project erroneously whether they will vote in the upcoming election or recall inaccurately whether they voted in the past election.⁶¹ Political scientists have long known that many nonvoters misreport that they voted to come across as “good citizens” to the interviewers.⁶² Accordingly, standard surveys routinely present voter turnout rates 15 to 20 percentage points higher than turnout rates reported by official election returns.⁶³ Worse, we know little about the recent patterns of overreporting given that the American National Election Study stopped conducting voter validation studies in 1990.

Given this challenge of overreporting, polling firms resort to correcting their survey data by using a variety of complex and often controversial predictive algorithms to reclassify many self-described voters as nonvoters.⁶⁴ This scheme is vulnerable to classifying nonvoters as voters, as well as voters as nonvoters, because the algorithms used to classify individuals rely on responses to questions about preregistration, turnout history, and campaign enthusiasm, rather than observable voting behavior. By contrast, exit polls overcome many of these problems with the benefit of immediate hindsight. Exit polls describe what voters thought and did at the polls only minutes earlier. There is simply no better way to capture actual voters in a sample than to station interviewers at hundreds of precincts nationwide on election day.

Exit polls also have the advantage of letting respondents self-administer the questionnaire and record their own responses, rather than requiring interviewers to read them the questions and document their answers, as in telephone surveys. This confidential self-reporting alleviates the pressures that respondents may feel to indicate that they cast a ballot or voted for a particular candidate when they did not, in an attempt to be judged favorably by an interviewer. By enabling voters to complete the questionnaires on their own, the exit polls greatly reduce the threat of

social desirability bias that can plague telephone surveys, particularly on sensitive issues such as voters' electoral choices.

Finally, the national exit polls collect completed questionnaires from far greater numbers of respondents than telephone surveys. Preelection and postelection surveys conducted by media outlets typically number between 500 and 1,500 cases. Even the two most prominent academic surveys with a multidecade time series—the American National Election Study and the General Social Survey—rarely administer their surveys to more than 3,000 respondents (see Table 1.4). By comparison, the national exit polls have always involved at least 7,500 respondents and routinely top 15,000 cases, including in 2008, when the exit polls were administered to 18,018 voters, and in 2010, when they were administered to 17,504 voters. Not only do these larger sample sizes permit great confidence in the overall results, but they also permit analysis of a far greater number of subgroups that comprise a small proportion of the overall electorate. Take, for example, Jewish voters, who comprise only 3 percent of the electorate. In a large standard survey of 2,000 people, Jews will only make up roughly sixty cases, resulting in a margin of error in excess of 12 points.

Despite their unique strengths, exit polls are not without their shortcomings. They are a type of sample survey, and as such are vulnerable to the four types of survey error: sampling error, coverage error, nonresponse error, and measurement error.⁶⁵ These errors can manifest themselves in two forms: (1) bias in the population estimates, and (2) decreases in the precision of population

Table 1.4 Number of Respondents in Postelection Polls, 1972–2010

Year	CBS/VRS/VNS/NEP National Exit Poll	American National Election Study	General Social Survey
1972	17,595	2,285	1,613
1974	Not administered	1,575	1,484
1976	15,300	1,909	1,499
1978	8,808	2,304	1,532
1980	15,201	1,408	1,468
1982	7,855	1,418	1,506
1984	9,174	1,989	1,473
1986	8,994	2,176	1,470
1988	11,645	1,775	1,481
1990	19,888	1,980	1,372
1992	15,490	2,255	1,606
1994	11,308	1,795	2,992
1996	16,637	1,534	2,904
1998	11,387	1,281	2,832
2000	13,225	1,555	2,807
2002	17,872	1,346	2,765
2004	13,719	1,066	2,812
2006	13,866	Not administered	4,510
2008	18,018	2,102	2,023
2010	17,504	Not administered	2,044

Source: National exit polls. See the section in Chapter 2 entitled “Creating a Cumulative National Data Set: Selecting Exit Polls” (pp. 28–29).

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estimates. The susceptibility of exit polls to any of these four types of errors, though, is no worse than that found in preelection or postelection telephone surveys.

First, exit polls, like all sample surveys, are susceptible to sampling error. Sampling error refers to potential bias in the sample estimates that occurs by chance from selecting a subset of the overall population. Unlike the other forms of error, though, the amount that sample estimates are likely to vary from the population can be calculated. Calculations hinge on the type of sampling, the sample size, and the degree of confidence desired in the calculation. Because the exit polls employ stratified sampling, the sample estimates have more variability than they would if they were truly random. Consequently, sampling error is larger in an exit poll than in a random-digit-dialing telephone survey of equal size once this reduced variability is taken into account.⁶⁶ Some of this difference in sampling error is offset by the much greater sample sizes typically found in the exit polls. Nonetheless, exit poll estimates still contain sampling error that must be accounted for when projecting responses to the entire active electorate.

Second, the exit polls can fall prey to coverage error. Coverage error occurs when every individual in the population does not have some probability of being selected. If those who are not covered are systematically different from those who are covered, the results of the poll can be biased. Exit polls have long been susceptible to coverage error from interviewers mistakenly applying interviewing rates by miscounting voters or incorrectly substituting replacements. In recent election cycles, though, a far bigger threat to coverage has emerged from states loosening their rules for early or absentee voting. Research has shown that the characteristics of early/absentee voters can be quite different from election day precinct voters, and this difference is capable of skewing exit poll findings.⁶⁷ NEP has confronted the problem by conducting preelection telephone surveys in the states with the highest rates of early/absentee voters, but early/absentee voters in many areas are still missed. To date, though, the coverage error that crept into exit polls has not substantially biased the composition or preferences of voting groups.⁶⁸

Third, exit poll results can be skewed by nonresponse error. Nonresponse error arises when sampled respondents fail to complete the questionnaire. This omission could bias results if certain groups respond at different rates than others. This type of error has been troublesome for the national exit polls in recent years, arguably the most problematic of the four types of survey error.⁶⁹ Some sampled voters are missed because of laws requiring interviewers to stand a certain distance from the polls, weather, or evasive voters, whereas others choose not to participate because of time constraints or wariness about some aspect of the process. Regardless of the cause, Republican voters are less likely than their Democratic counterparts to complete exit polls. Fortunately, this differential response among partisan voters does not appear to bias the distribution of vote choices within particular groups, including partisan ones. Nonetheless, exit pollsters have attempted to reduce the threats posed by nonresponse error. They have recruited interviewers possessing characteristics correlated with higher response rates, introduced training techniques to induce greater cooperation, and collected observable information on voters failing to respond that is then used to correct for nonresponse on these factors.

Finally, exit polls can suffer from measurement error like any type of survey. Measurement error results when a question fails to measure what it was intended to measure because either

respondents fail to understand the meaning of a question or the context in which it is asked steers them toward an incorrect response. This error can bias the findings of a question if respondents provide answers that are systematically different from their true preferences. National exit pollsters dedicate considerable effort to reducing threats from measurement error. They present questions in a clear, easy-to-read format, employing sparse, simplistic language to enhance understanding of the questions. They use comprehensive, mutually exclusive response options to ensure that one and only one answer is applicable. And, they permit voters to self-administer the questions to limit the interviewer's effect on responses. Moreover, exit pollsters continually undertake experiments designed to expose potential biases in measurement. For example, in 1996, they replaced "grab bag" questions, whereby respondents were asked to choose from a list of characteristics the ones that were applicable to them, with separate yes-no questions for each characteristic after experiments revealed that the incidence of characteristics in the grab bag were being underestimated.

Design of the Book

Despite the unique insights that exit polls can provide about the composition and preferences of voters, they are seldom used after the days immediately following an election. Once media organizations have tapped the exit polls for explanations of electoral outcomes, they often disappear from the public eye. Some scholars may use them over the next year or two to explore the voting behavior of certain subgroups, such as Hispanics, women, or young people, but for the most part they recede into memory, rarely used beyond the next national election.

Unfortunately, few efforts are made to consider the behavior of voters over time. Historical context typically centers on comparing an election to its most recent predecessor, such as contrasting the 2008 presidential election with the 2004 contest. Rarely are exit poll responses tracked and analyzed over time, leaving many important questions understudied. For example, how have various subgroups in the electorate evolved over time? Have their relative sizes in the active electorate increased or decreased? Have their voting patterns grown increasingly partisan or independent? Which subgroups in the electorate behave similarly through the years?

We suspect that a major reason exit polls are underutilized is that they are largely inaccessible to academics, journalists, or the public. Although each exit poll resides in prominent data archives, such as the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan or the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, a cumulative data file has not yet been constructed that permits temporal comparisons. Over the years, the seven different media outlets and consortia that have sponsored the thirty-two national exit polls conducted during the last nineteen election cycles have each applied a different coding scheme to the data. They have employed alternative variable labels, assigned different values to the responses, and made use of alternative formatting criteria. As a result, the data cannot be easily merged and analyzed.

We have undertaken the time-consuming effort to arrange the data collected from each exit poll in a standardized format and merged the data across years. As a result, time-ordered observations of every repeated survey question can now be generated and analyzed. In the remainder of

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this book, we use these time series to derive insights into the presidential and congressional voting behavior of key subgroups in the electorate over the past four decades.

The results of this effort are presented in the next four chapters. In Chapter 2, we discuss how the questions from individual exit polls from different elections were combined and describe the rationale for selecting specific questions for analysis. In the process, we lay out the techniques used to merge the data, detailing how we handled variations in question wording, missing values, and differences in polling organizations. We describe the methods used for computing distributions, generating sampling errors, and producing graphs. And, we explain how the tables and graphs presented in each subsequent chapter should be interpreted.

Chapter 3 focuses on the composition of respondents to the exit polls. Using answers to recurring exit poll questions, we examine the distribution of various groups of respondents from 1972 through 2010. We consider whether different respondent groups have been increasing or decreasing in their relative size in exit polls over time. We detail the results of the most recent exit poll, in 2010, examining how it compares to historical trends. We conclude by considering the differences between respondents in the midterm and presidential exit polls, which is particularly important, considering the differential turnout rates in each election context.

In Chapter 4, we examine the presidential voting preferences of key groups in the exit polls from 1972 through 2008. We examine how partisan preferences have evolved over time. We pay particular attention to the 2008 presidential race, identifying which respondent groups were key supporters of Barack Obama and John McCain and assessing how their choices compare to long-term trends in presidential preferences. We conclude the chapter by considering which groups serve as the party's base, predisposed toward one party's candidates or the other, and which groups are susceptible to swinging their vote from one party to the other.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, switches the focus to congressional elections. We examine the congressional voting patterns of prominent groups in the exit polls conducted from 1976 through 2010. We look closely at the Republican takeover of the House in the 2010 election, analyzing how respondent groups deviated from their historical patterns. Again we conclude by differentiating between partisan base groups and swing groups.

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