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Political pollsters face tougher job

Expert cites 'increasing obstacles and barriers'

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Pollsters face a growing number of obstacles while doing their work -- such as the rapid growth of cell phone use, caller-ID technology and answering machines, combined with the public's growing resistance to opinion surveys.

Most agree, however, that those forces have not yet crippled telephone polls. And the industry is unlikely to abandon phone surveys without something more reliable to take their place.

They are closely watching federal and state laws concerning telemarketing to make sure research and polling remain exempt.

"I think that polls face increasing obstacles and barriers," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & The Press. "But polls done with reasonable schedules and reasonable rigor can still overcome these barriers."

The Pew Research Center has conducted research in the past that tested whether polls conducted over several days would get results similar to exhaustive surveys taken over several months. The study found no significant differences in the results, but the center plans to do a similar study this spring.

Increasing obstacles to phone polling are less likely to affect national polls done by top polling firms that follow accepted practices of selecting a random sample and doing a thorough follow-up to reach everyone possible.

The more immediate effect is on state polls done with smaller samples on a smaller budget, sometimes by polling companies not familiar with state demographics and voting patterns.

Some polls taken just before this year's midterm election picked up a voter surge toward Republicans in several Senate races following President Bush's barnstorming campaign tour, while others missed that surge.

Pollsters and analysts faced the additional challenge of an unprecedented combination of anxieties about terrorism, the economy and a possible war with Iraq.

National polls in the extraordinarily close 2000 presidential race generally were accurate.

Those in the polling business are constantly researching what's happening to their industry, which plays a critical role in both the political debate and marketing strategies.

Researchers believe less than 5 percent of households use only a cell phone, although the number is higher among certain groups like young urban adults. The overall number using only cell phones is likely to grow, so researchers are looking

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for ways to cope with the changes.

People also are growing more reluctant to participate in polls, something the industry has been noticing for more than a decade.

Michael Traugott, a public opinion researcher at the University of Michigan, says that reluctance can be traced to people being too busy and having a lack of interest in politics.

He says increasing activity by telemarketers, who occasionally disguise their sales calls as legitimate polling, could increase that public resistance.

Dozens of states are looking at laws that would allow people to shield themselves from telemarketing, but it's unclear what impact that would have on legitimate public opinion research. The public opinion industry is also closely monitoring federal rules that could have an impact on auto-dialing methods that are crucial to polling.

"At this point, we don't know of any state laws that are a total impediment to research done by telephone," said Donna Gillin, who monitors such developments for the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research.

"The biggest issue is not the law as it is, but the public blurring the difference between (legitimate polling) and telemarketing," said Linda Piekarski, an executive at Survey Sampling Inc., a Connecticut company that provides phone samples to polling companies.

People underestimate the influence they gain through polls and the surveys are "increasingly being viewed as nuisances or invasions of privacy," said Peter Tuckel, a researcher at Hunter College in New York.

Pollsters need to do a better job of burnishing their own image, Tuckel said.

"Americans are losing sight of the critical role that polls can play in a democratic, consumer-oriented society such as ours," he said.

Pollsters are also trying to figure out whether telephone surveys, currently the most reliable and affordable method, will eventually become obsolete.

"That," said Tuckel, "is the million dollar question."

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