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HEADLINE: Exit Poll Wrong Call in Senate Race Leaves Anger,
Hurt, Red Faces

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BODY:

"N.H.'s Smith Defeated," read the front-page headline in yesterday morning's Washington Post.

"New Hampshire Democrat Dick Swett has beaten conservative Sen. Bob Smith," declared the New York Post.

"Democrat Dick Swett stunned freshman Sen. Bob Smith," reported USA Today.

Don't always believe what you read - and don't believe every poll you hear.

Those are two messages voters may leave with after news organizations Tuesday used exit polls to write their stories and announce to viewers that New Hampshire's U.S. Senate seat went to Swett.

They were wrong. "I don't believe it's right to announce results before an election is over," victorious Republican incumbent Bob Smith said from his Bedford campaign office.

The networks made their projections shortly after 7 p.m., when a majority of the state's polling places closed.

President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore called Swett with congratulations. Friends and colleagues phoned to offer condolences to Smith.

Final results showed Smith won by nearly 15,000 votes.

After the network projections, the polls remained open for at least a half-hour in 20 communities, including Nashua, Merrimack and Exeter.

Swett's campaign office yesterday received calls from residents who planned to back the Democrat, but didn't vote after hearing he had been projected the winner.

"Clearly, there were people who chose not to vote because (they heard) the race was over," said Tilley, who thinks projections should be delayed until all polls close.

Smith said he planned to look into what might be done to reform exit polling.

West Coast leaders complained to network executives this year that projecting a White House winner before their polls close hurts Western candidates and the political process.

"What happens here is what's happening in California. It unfortunately exists," Secretary of State Bill Gardner said.

Republican U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg said the faulty call was "outrageous and totally inexcusable."

"It's a big black eye for the national media, and the national news networks especially," he told The Associated Press.

The race for New Hampshire's Senate seat was the only one of 114 races called wrong by Voter News Service, which conducted

the interviews with voters. VNS is a cooperative of The Associated Press, ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC.

"It was the largest error in any exit poll estimate I've ever seen since I've been doing this (since 1981)," said VNS Editorial Director Murray Edelman.

Edelman said his staff planned to examine what went wrong. "It's probably simple, a lot more Swett people answered our poll than Smith voters," he said.

Voter News Service randomly asked the voting choices of 2,355 people as they left 25 precincts. From that number, 1,165 also were asked more extensive questions.

The 25 precincts, chosen based on past voting history and to reflect the state geographically, are kept secret so candidates and supporters can't target them and throw off the exit polls, according to Larry Laughlin, AP's chief of bureau for Northern New England. Statistically, the exit poll had a 95 percent chance of being no more than 3 percentage points either way from the election's final outcome. The exit poll showed Swett 5 points ahead.

A 2:30 p.m. wave of exit poll results gave Swett a 3-point lead. A second wave at 3:45 p.m. showed Swett up by more than 5 points. The final wave at about 6:30 p.m. had Swett up by slightly less than 5 points.

"That's pretty comfortable for what they're used to dealing with with exit polls," Laughlin said.

As some networks began backing away from their earlier predictions, The Associated Press held out longer Tuesday night.

"Our feeling was we were just going to sweat it out, no pun intended, the actual vote returns," Laughlin said. "It's as close to scientific as they can get."

Added Laughlin, "I think obviously people are going to be in there with their screwdrivers and wrenches trying to figure out what needs to be adjusted." Smith said his campaign saw actual voting counts favor them. "As our numbers came in, we were never ever behind," he said.

Republican Presidential nominee Bob Dole called Smith yesterday, telling Smith the faulty projection and eventual victory offered Dole some levity in an otherwise difficult night.

"The story should have been that Bob Smith and Dick Swett had a close race and after the votes were counted Bob Smith won in a close race," Smith said. "Instead, the story is exit polling wrong and Bob Smith wins. You have headlines all over the country: 'Smith defeated,' in The Washington Post."