



## Networks will look to Somerville Tuesday

### Research firm to collect their exit-poll data

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The next president will be elected in Everytown, U.S.A.

But the news will come from Main Street, Somerville.

From a plain office above a former Woolworth's, Edison Media Research will feed elections results and analysis to the TV networks on Tuesday so they can declare a winner -- knock on wood.

The networks have hired the Somerville-based research company and Mitofsky International of New York to run the National Election Pool, the new consortium of election forecasters that replaces the Voter News Service after the disastrous election predictions in 2000 and 2002. A team of expert number-crunchers in Somerville will sift voting results from the Associated Press along with exit poll data to see when winners can be declared.

"We'll make recommendations to the AP and the networks on which races are ready to be called," said Joe Lenski, 39, co-founder of Edison Media Research.

ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, Fox News and the AP want Lenski -- best known for market research on country music and Internet trends -- and exit polling pioneer Warren Mitofsky to make sure nobody suffers an embarrassing replay of 2000.

"They're the only game in town that could do this," said CNN Washington bureau chief David Bohrman, citing an exhaustive 2002 post-mortem by Lenski and Mitofsky and a backup polling system they designed for CNN in 2002.

"Hardly any of us in the news organization have on staff that kind of experience and knowledge," said Kathy Frankovic, director of surveys for CBS News.

Congress held an investigation after networks gave Florida to Al Gore before the polls closed there four years ago. The networks wound up declaring victory for George W. Bush, then admitting the presidency was up in the air.

A computer meltdown at the Voter News Service produced no projections -- erroneous or otherwise -- in the 2002 congressional races.

With surveys indicating another presidential photo finish, network officials say they will be more cautious about calling a winner this time.

Projections aside, exit polls designed by Lenski and his mentor, Mitofsky, should help decipher why people voted and whether it's a mandate for specific policies, said Rutgers professor Cliff

Zukin, president-elect of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

"We need the explanation. We don't need the projection," Zukin said. "In 2002, everyone was left guessing the meaning of the (congressional) election -- why did George Bush pick up extra seats?"

Mitofsky, 70, conducted his first presidential exit polling in 1968, for CBS. The former Census Bureau employee also has conducted exit polls in Mexico, Russia and the Philippines. Election night projections serve a purpose, he maintains.

"In a democracy, it's the orderly transfer of power that keeps the democracy accepting the results of elections. If it drags on too long, there's always a suspicion of fraud," said Mitofsky, recalling a 1988 election controversy in Mexico.

Lenski -- who was part of the CNN/CBS team in 2000 and admits he was one "of many people responsible" for calling the Florida race -- suspects voters could go to bed Tuesday in a similar state of suspense despite his best efforts.

"It's hard to believe there would be that many states that close again," he said. "But if it is as close as it was four years ago ..."

Edison Media Research set up shop in an elaborate Victorian mansion in Somerville about five years ago, after outgrowing their office space in Edison, and added the Main Street outpost in 2002.

But the exit polling operation "has its tentacles all over the country," Lenski said.

His company and Mitofsky's also will work on 34 U.S. Senate races, 11 governor's races, and a handful of referendums.

The firms will have thousands of workers conducting exit polls across the country, some asking voters to complete anonymous questionnaires and others gathering vote totals from a sample of precincts in every state. (The Star-Ledger is a client of Edison Media Research for New Jersey election data.)

The information will be called into phone centers around the country.

In Somerville, a panel of professors, Washington analysts and network veterans will analyze the data, fueled by pizza and sandwiches and coffee. The team has been rehearsing since July with mocked-up election results.

"You're only seeing a small part of a really big nationwide organization," Lenski said yesterday in Somerville.

Lenski's first love is politics despite a degree in mechanical engineering from Princeton University. He started out as a statistical analyst for the CBS/New York Times Poll, then worked in the early 1990s as a consultant for the network exit-polling consortium that preceded the Voter News Service. It was headed by Mitofsky.

Lenski and partner Larry Rosin, also a Princeton graduate, founded Edison Media Research in 1994. From 1996 to 2000, Lenski was part of the CNN/CBS Decision Team. He oversaw the design and operation of CNN RealVote, and appeared on CNN in 2002 to discuss the election projection process.

Edison Media Research also has conducted audience surveys for radio stations in the United

States, Argentina and Hungary, and has helped artists decide which singles to release.

But Lenski, who is a virtual encyclopedia of states' election procedures, considers Election Night 2000 "the wildest night of my life." He can recount, almost minute by minute, which networks made what predictions, or retracted them, and when. The Florida experience taught him some things.

"We learned in 2000 that just because an election official reports an election result, it doesn't mean it's 100 percent accurate," Lenski said. For example, in Florida's Volusia County, a computer malfunction wrongly gave Gore 16,000 extra votes, he said.

"You learn that, in addition, not all the votes are counted on election night. In certain states with large numbers of mail ballots, there might be more votes in the mail."

The networks have promised Congress they won't project statewide outcomes until state polls close. Lenski and Mitofsky have introduced more-sophisticated computers to the process, and their pooled data will be parsed by armies of geeks and lawyers at each network.

Also, absentee voters will be surveyed in 13 states, compared with three states in 2000, said CBS' Frankovic.

The soft-spoken Lenski suggested 2000 was a statistical anomaly. But that's history. Who's going to win next week?

"There's no way to know right now," the pollster insisted. "Every poll I've seen shows an evenly divided electorate."

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