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Revamped exit poll, vote counting operations get test in closely watched election

By DAVID BAUDER
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NEW YORK (AP) -- With public interest running unusually high, this year's midterm elections pose tough challenges for the vote-counting and exit poll operations that major news organizations rely on to provide speedy word about the outcome.

The system for tabulating votes, run by The Associated Press, will have to deal with a greater than normal number of polling places that are using new voting machines, increasing the possibility of glitches or delays.

And the consortium formed by ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel and the AP to conduct exit polls on Election Day has made changes to prevent a repeat of problems experienced in 2004. That year, early poll results were leaked to the Internet and created a misleading picture of how the presidential race was going. Later exit poll results also were unreliable in some cases because of problems that included insufficient training of interviewers.

The 2006 midterms are being watched especially keenly because Democrats are hoping to ride public anger about the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq to take control of the House and Senate away from Republicans.

"We're prepared for a late night, maybe being here all night and into the next morning," said Dan Merkle, ABC News decision desk director. ABC, CBS and NBC plan one-hour prime-time specials and periodic updates, while cable news networks will follow the elections full-time.

As they did in 2004, the networks will rely solely on the AP to tabulate returns. The news cooperative's vote-count operation will employ an estimated 5,000 people on Nov. 7 -- about 4,600 to retrieve vote totals and 400 to input that information into a central computer system.

The AP employs stringers in nearly every U.S. county, or every city and town in New England, to call in results of more than 6,000 state and local races to one of more than a dozen tabulation centers, with regional hubs in New York and Spokane, Wash. The earliest returns begin to trickle out shortly after 6 p.m. ET, when the first polls close in Indiana and Kentucky, and the pace quickens to a peak between 10 p.m. and midnight ET.

Updated counts are sent to newspapers, broadcasters and Web sites every few minutes.

In a typical year, 5 percent of counties are dealing with new voting equipment at some of their polling places. This year, it's 60 percent.

"That's scary. It's real scary," said Sheldon Gawiser, elections director at NBC News, who added that the possibility of voting machine breakdowns slowing the process is his biggest worry this year.

Several problems surfaced during primary elections this year. Equipment trouble in Chicago caused very late results there. A software bug prevented many counties in Florida from delivering precinct totals. Up to 20 percent of California's vote wasn't counted on primary night, according to an AP analysis.

"There's always something," said Sandy Johnson, the AP's Washington bureau chief, "and if you're in the business of counting votes and calling elections as the AP is, you take that

into consideration and are as careful and accurate and fast as you can be."

During the last six election cycles, the AP has never declared control of the House for one party until after midnight Eastern time; the earliest was 12:56 a.m. in 2004. In two of the past six cycles, the AP called the Senate for one party before midnight.

While exit poll information will be used to help call Senate and governor's races, news organizations for the most part have to rely on the actual results in House contests to make their calls. The increased number of mail-in or provisional ballots also works against quick resolutions.

"That makes this potentially a very exciting election night," said Kathleen Frankovic, CBS News director of surveys "You have to wait for vote counts in close races anyway. Now you have to wait for vote counts by people learning how to use the equipment."

Edison Media Research conducts the exit polls for the six news organizations. In 2004, early poll results appeared on Web sites wrongly suggesting that Democrat John Kerry was beating President Bush in battleground states that Bush won when the votes were counted.

"The question I'm always getting is `why were the exit polls wrong?'" said Keating Holland, CNN polling director. "It was like a baseball game -- I left early and the scoreboard was saying the Yankees were winning and they lost. So why was the scoreboard wrong?"

This year, Edison will not release any polling data to its clients until 5 p.m. ET. This way, the first wave of numbers most news executives and reporters see will reflect polls taken through the afternoon, instead of just in the morning hours.

Edison is setting up a "quarantine room" where each organization can send two experts to monitor the data before 5 p.m. to make sure there are no problems. But these representatives will be forbidden from communicating with anyone outside the room.

Edison also toughened its training of the people who will question voters at about 1,000 polling places across the country. The training stressed how important it is for interviewers to approach prospective respondents randomly, using a set interval like every fifth person leaving the voting place.

Edison also has hired a more mature group of interviewers, in part by relying less on recruitment on college campuses, said Joseph Lenski, the company's executive vice president.

"They learned from 2004 and implemented a series of things that should help us in 2006," said CBS' Frankovic. "I also think that everybody is going to be more cautious in jumping to conclusions."

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