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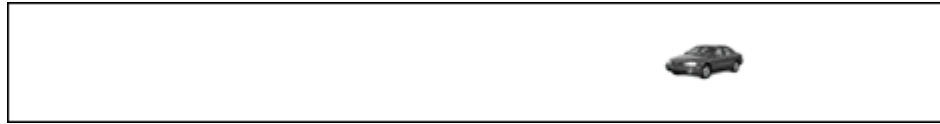
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Early voting may add twist to exit polling

10-30-04

By *Jim Schlosser Staff Writer*
News & Record

As popularity of early voting grows, ponder this possibility.

Pollsters stand outside selected early-voting places each day and ask a sampling of departing voters how they voted.

Polling results are combined with those from other early-voting sites in America.

The polling firm announces presidential candidate X is ahead of presidential candidate Y based on a sampling of votes cast days or even weeks before the election ends.

Telling the public who's ahead or behind based on early votes would be a radical departure from the tradition of exit pollsters waiting until election night, after most polls have closed, to release findings.

George Gilbert, Guilford County's supervisor of elections, says he isn't aware of exit polling at the county's 13 early-voting polling sites, where the deadline for early ballots is 1 p.m. today.

But, he says, the law allows exit polling, as long as pollsters remain the necessary distance from the polling place door.

Tim Vercellotti, an Elon University political science professor who conducts the statewide Elon Poll, says a polling firm would be ethically bound to keep early voting results secret until the end of Election Day.

For pollsters to do otherwise, he says, "would be grossly unethical and they would be blackballed."

Still, in this electronic era when valuable information rarely remains secret for long, couldn't a rogue pollster release early voting results?



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"They'd never work again," Vercellotti says.

Exit polling of early voters is taking place in North Carolina and elsewhere, says Warren Mitofsky, a Guilford College graduate who in 1967 pioneered exit polling for CBS News. His firm, Mitofsky International of New York, is joining with **Edison Media Research** of Princeton, N.J., to do Election Day exit polling for a consortium of six news organizations: ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, NBC and The Associated Press.

"We are doing polls of absentee and early voters in 13 states, including North Carolina," Mitofsky said in an e-mail to the News & Record.

"Yes, the polls are in progress. No, I don't know the results of them. A partial poll does not provide useful information about the outcome. I can wait until the polls are complete."

Vercellotti says standing outside polls and sampling those who vote early would be labor intensive and costly.

"You'd have to have someone outside the polls every day for two straight weeks or more," he says.

A better way, he says, would be to telephone a sampling of people who have already voted. A list of early voters is considered public and is available from the county election board offices.

Leaders of the Guilford Democratic and Republican parties say they aren't polling early voters. It's not in their budgets. County Democratic Chairman Tom Coley says his organization's only interest is motivating Democrats who haven't voted to go do so.

If exit polling were being done, he says, he'd be against releasing results, even if it showed Democrats ahead. Not only would it be wrong to release such data, "the information may sway a person who hasn't voted. That person may decide not to vote."

The voter, he says, may decide a candidate has the election locked up or is hopelessly behind.

County GOP Chairman Marcus Kindley says he, too, would oppose releasing early voting exit polling results.

But he can see the day when political parties will do exit polling of early voters -- for internal use only, he stresses. Polling would provide early warning: If a candidate isn't doing well, new strategies can be devised.

Kindley acknowledges that if political pundits noticed a sudden shift in Republican or Democratic strategy, that would signal a candidate

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wasn't faring well with early voters.

Premature release of exit polling numbers is a risk that arises from early voting, Kindley says. He points out that in 2000, the first time early voting was allowed in North Carolina, he joined in a lawsuit against it.

He says he still has reservations, but says there's no denying more people are voting as a result of early voting.

Another benefit, Kindley says, is early voting provides the party organization clues to how voting is going, even without exit polling.

For example, Kindley says, 30 percent of registered voters in the Oak Ridge community already have voted. That pleases him because GOP registration is heavy in Oak Ridge.

Vercellotti says early voting should help national campaigns funnel resources. When it becomes apparent a large percentage in a certain place already have voted, money and workers can be shifted elsewhere. Why waste advertising money on voters who have already voted?

He agrees with others that from the standpoint of democracy, early voting boosts voter turnout by making voting more convenient.

But a negative, in Vercellotti's view, is early voting may eventually lessen the excitement of an event he looks forward to, Election Day. What if most people have already voted?

"From a sentimental standpoint, does Election Day lose some of its zing?" the professor asks. "I love going to the polls on Election Day."

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