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Results of exit polls lie in hands of 12 experts

By Jonathan Storm
INQUIRER TV CRITIC

The accuracy of TV voting results on Election Night rests primarily in the brains and computers of two distinguished survey researchers and a panel of 10 number-crunchers.

But don't discount the importance of cheesecake.

Between them, **Joe Lenski** and Warren Mitofsky have more than 50 years of experience in analyzing data - predicting the outcome of elections, certainly, but also helping lawyers decide how to try their cases, and giving rockers advice on which album tracks to release as singles.

The two head the National Election Pool, which replaced the Voter News Service after the reporting disaster in 2000.

Mitofsky, 70, will be working his 10th presidential election. His firm, Mitofsky International, has performed exit polls in countries from Russia to the Philippines. Perhaps his most famous legal research helped spur a change of venue in the case of four New York City police officers in the shooting of Amadou Diallo.

Lenski, 39, went to work for CBS in 1988, right out of Princeton University, as a statistical analyst. He cofounded **Edison Media Research** in 1994. Besides doing research to advise musicians, the company has worked for a host of commercial clients.

The National Election Pool's analysis headquarters, above a former Woolworth's in downtown Somerville, N.J., about an hour southwest of New York, will be action central on Election Night.

Ten high-powered numbers mavens - university professors, statisticians, political researchers - will analyze figures, along with Lenski and Mitofsky, who will decide when winners should be called in each state, and relay their calls to the networks. Each news organization retains control of when and what to announce.

The experts in Somerville will survey exit-poll data generated by the National Election Pool and voting results collected by the Associated Press, a cooperative owned and operated by more than 1,500 U.S. daily newspapers. The AP plans to station employees at every county vote-tabulating location in the nation, funneling numbers to the counting house.

Here's the difference this time, according to Lenski:

"Since 2000, we have a better realization of the limitations of the actual vote. There are certain votes that aren't counted on Election Day, and there has been an increase in the percentage of people voting before Election Day."

The National Election Pool, whose efforts reportedly cost \$10 million, has boosted the number of early and absentee-ballot polls it will conduct more than fourfold, to 13, from the three that Voter News Service performed in 2000.

The AP has installed new quality controls to test numbers before they get into the system, and the National Election Pool has developed new computer models, based primarily on voting patterns, to flag seeming discrepancies.

The new system performed well in 23 presidential primaries. And, unlike in the past, all the data is available for everybody at the networks to see.

"At any time, any member of the pool can look at any report about precincts and counties," Lenski said.

The research eggheads have been gathering over snacks and desserts on Thursdays since the beginning of July, subjecting their hotshot software and equipment to upward of five hours a week of a mock 50-state election, without

significant problems.

"The big winner so far," Lenski said, "is the sandwich shop down the street, and the bakery that makes their cheesecake."

Workers at La Delizia, delivering to what they think is some sort of weekly party, say the cake, made by Villabate Bakery in Brooklyn, is a big seller for them.

For Election Night, they'd better bring two.

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