HEADLINE: Telling Polls Apart

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BODY:
Here's the difference a day makes: 17 points in a presidential horse-race poll.

And here's the difference a week makes: eight points--in the opposite direction.

Or at least that's what the Gallup Organization via USA Today and CNN would have us believe. In barely a week, Gallup surveys reported that Republican presidential hopeful George W. Bush led Vice President Al Gore by 19 points on Monday, Aug. 7, by two points the very next day--and then back up by 10 points on Saturday among registered voters and a whopping 16 points among those most likely to vote.

Well, perhaps that really happened. And maybe monkeys will fly out of the exhaust vents of the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

Already it's been a silly season of statistical goofs and gaffes perpetrated in the name of news by clueless journalists and the pollsters who accommodate them.

Gallup isn't alone in building this Tower of Babel, one poll at a time. Depending on which of nine different national polls you read in the past week, Bush is up anywhere from three to nearly 20 points. Diversity is a good thing--but not in the results of candidate preference polls done at approximately the same time.

Of course this is a volatile period. During convention season, measures of candidate support--the horse race--quiver and bounce in response to alternating pulses of energy flowing from the two parties' big parties. The best polls--and Gallup usually does some of the very best--will vary during this unsettled time.

But don't let me or other media pollsters off the hook so easily. This year, many of us are contributing to the volatility by cutting corners and taking unprecedented risks to meet the needs of the Internet- and cable TV-driven 24-hour news day.

To meet these frenzied demands for content, polls have been downsized. CBS, for example, reported a survey of 503 registered voters over the weekend. These tiny samples come with correspondingly larger margins of sampling error, which about guarantees more survey-to-survey variation in the horse race that has exactly nothing to do with actual changes in the race.

The current election cycle also marks the flowering of the one-day horse-race poll. Surveys done in a single night have their place, but they're simply too coarse a gauge to reliably estimate each candidate's share of the vote. Most polling organizations have steered clear of asking candidate preferences on one-nighters. Until now.
Also this year, the quickie polls are being done even more quickly. A case in point: last week's one-night Gallup poll that found Bush up by two points. Interviewing for this survey ended at 8:50 p.m. East Coast time, in order to make USA Today's deadline, said Frank Newport, editor in chief of Gallup.

That early quit may be okay for easterners. But you have to wonder whom Gallup poll-takers were interviewing in California before they stopped calling at 5:50 p.m. Pacific time. Shut-ins? Unemployed actors? Latchkey children?

The correct answer: Democrats. The Gallup one-nighter significantly overrepresented Democrats--39 percent of their sample were Democrats, compared with 33 percent in the previous poll. No wonder Bush had such a bad night (or afternoon, out West).

Other pollsters have risked similar train wrecks by conducting all or most of their interviews on Friday and Saturday, again to meet the demands of media clients. Those are notoriously bad days for interviewing, because people with actual lives are not at home, and their views often differ from those who are. (A confession: In response to breaking news, I've done polls for The Post on a Thursday-through-Saturday schedule, which is better but still risky.)

Newsweek routinely interviews on Thursday--a good night--and Friday, which is ghastly. Why doesn't the magazine simply start on Wednesday, another good night for calling? It's obvious: So the poll can be used to measure reaction to the latest news developments. We all want the freshest survey results. But there's a big difference between a poll that is fresh and one that is half-baked.

Then there's a raft of things pretending to be polls, such as most surveys conducted over the Internet and focus groups. Just last week, celebrity pollster Frank Luntz was officially censured by the National Council on Public Polls for allegedly claiming on MSNBC that the uncommitted voters who participated in his focus groups were representative of all independents.

I like focus groups. The insights that emerge often are revelatory and newsworthy--but not because the views expressed by 10 people chatting around a table are somehow "representative" of the opinions of any larger slice of the public.

So what's a dedicated poll-watcher to do? Lie low until after Labor Day. The polls--and the presidential race--will settle down as people's preferences solidify.

Alternatively, look at all the reputable polls, and compute your own average of the results. Academics suggest this "grand mean" usually is the best and most reliable estimate of what's really happening.

Some general rules: Larger samples of 750 or more registered voters are better than smaller samples. Polls conducted over three or four days are generally more reliable than polls done in two days, not to mention one-nighters. After Labor Day, pay more attention
to samples of likely voters and less to results based on all registered voters.

Finally, remember that more polls are undone by margin of thinking error than by margin of sampling error. Make the reporter and pollster prove it, particularly if a survey result seems odd or counterintuitive, or contradicts the results of other recent polls.

The writer is The Post's director of polling.

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