

The election eye . . .

The election polls — consider them lightly

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The two latest polls on the probable outcome of the Senate race between Democrat Frank Church and Republican Steve Symms point up the fallacy of election polls unless they are handled scientifically and taken within a reasonable period before the election.

This writer has repeatedly cautioned about taking straw polls seriously, or the ranking of legislators by various special interest groups. In most cases they are a form of political propaganda, though the special interest polls do position politicians in these categories.

Past election records, fortunately show most voters are not fooled by them.

These polls and rankings on various issues serve as a temporary psychological boost, but most candidates know that too many races are decided in the last few days before the election — not a year, not six months, and not even a month ahead.

Last week the Boise-based Idaho Professional Resources Group headed by Howard Schrag released a survey report which showed Symms ahead with 44.7 percent, Church with 33.1 percent and 23.2 percent undecided. This indicated a drastic shift of some 21 percent in favor of Symms from a January poll which had Church leading with 41.8 percent, Symms with 32.7 percent and 25.5 percent undecided.

Even more startling was a poll conducted by the Idaho Statesman at Boise which had Church at 50.34 percent, Symms at 34 percent, and 15.3 percent undecided.

Schrag said there were 200 randomly made calls to the seven largest counties of Ada, Bannock, Bonneville, Canyon, Twin Falls, Kootenai and Nez Perce, plus three small counties of Jefferson, Idaho and Owyhee.

The Statesman poll reported it was based on 385 telephone calls in all of the 44 Idaho counties, which would indicate a more representative sampling, but how the poll was taken could be a factor.

These are polls which were conducted at about the same time last week, yet they give two contrasting results — further strengthening the belief of voters they are unreliable.

Considerable questions also must be raised about the Statesman poll, which showed Church led Symms in East Idaho by a 59 to 29.5 percent margin and 56.3 to 28.7 percent in the North, but only 42 to 39.8 percent in the Southwest.

This does not follow past voting patterns, where Church barely leads his opponent in East Idaho, and loses many of

the rural counties. He also does much better in Southwest Idaho than the polls indicate, but the North Idaho results may be nearly accurate.

Schrag was apologetic for his polls, saying the "race is tightening up," but the contrasting results with January would indicate Symms had forged well ahead. Schrag acknowledged that because his poll is far ahead of the election and was taken in only 10 counties, he did not put much stock in the results.

Much is made of the fact that the Schrag poll correctly

showed Allan Larsen had forged into the lead in the Republican gubernatorial primaries in 1978 and edged out Vernon Ravenscroft.

However, many forget that the poll was erroneous in giving Lt. Gov. William Murphy the lead over Philip E. Batt and was off a number of percentage points in several major races in the general election.

The Post-Register carried a four-part series last week which explained the pitfalls pollsters encounter, and warning of their fallibility. Readers should view these polls in the same context.

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