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The political pulse

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The election eye . . .

The polls discredited by election results

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The Nov. 4 election results did something besides bringing an Republican sweep — they vividly discredited all of the polls.

This writer has repeatedly warned that election polls and ratings by special groups on the basis of how legislators and members of Congress voted should be viewed with considerable reservation. They should actually be looked on as a political game and not be taken seriously. This is less true of independent professional polls, however.

This writer was more accurate with predictions incumbents would win on the legislative and local level, the wine issue would pass, that Sheriff Blaine Skinner would likely lose, and the Republicans would win congressional races. No forecast was made on the senatorial contest except to say that it was tight, which indeed it was.

The surprises were not so much in who the winners were, but more in the tremendous margins by which they won.

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The national polls, such as the Harris, Gallup and Roper, have been more accurate than others but they failed miserably this year. Other spot polls, such as those taken by the wire services, national television, and newspapers were even worse. They all indicated the presidential race would be a cliffhanger, with the results in doubt.

What made these national polls look particularly bad was their insistence that they were done on a scientific basis, even though only about 2,000 voters were contacted. These pollsters used computers, the so-called sophisticated random-digit telephone sampling techniques and years of experience, but were proven wrong by American voters.

Almost all surveys conducted before election day concluded the race between President Carter and Ronald Reagan was too close to call. Most indicated that Reagan appeared to hold the edge.

Pollster Louis Harris was about the only national analyst to predict a Reagan victory, placing the percentages at Reagan 45 and Carter 40. But even he was way off in his figures. He waited until election morning to do this.

The election results showed Reagan had 43.2 million votes, or 51 percent; Carter 34.9 million, 41 percent; and independent John B. Anderson 5.6 million, 7 percent. Libertarian Ed Clark got 1 percent.

The electoral vote was lopsided, even more so than expected, 489 for Reagan and only 49 for Carter, with 270 needed to win.

One of the saddest showings was the fact that only 52.3 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, the lowest turnout in 32 years.

It's to Idaho's credit that it was among one of the heaviest voting states, with 76.7 percent, or 445,604 ballots of the 582,000 registered voters. This, of course, was due largely to the hot U.S. senatorial race between Democrat Frank Church and Republican Steve Symms, because it was a foregone conclusion Reagan would easily win the state.

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The Idaho Daily Statesman, Boise, bravely conducted its poll among 820 people but the results were a disaster.

The poll showed Church favored by 48.3 percent, Symms only 39.3 percent and Libertarian Larry Fullmer 1.2 percent.

The election gave Symms 218,793 votes, 50 percent; Church 214,351, 49 percent, and Fullmer 6,645, 1 percent. The poll was 10 percent off, which is far greater than the margin most major election races are decided.

The Statesman poll also was badly off on other major races. It showed that in Idaho Reagan would get 51 percent, Carter 24 percent and Anderson 6 percent. Reagan got 290,699 votes and Carter 110,192, giving Reagan 66.5 percent and Carter 25.2 percent. Anderson gleaned 2 percent.

For the 2nd District Congress seat, the poll favored Republican George Hansen over Democrat Diane Bilyeu 46-31 percent and 23 percent undecided. The election gave Hansen 116,196 votes, or 59 percent, and Mrs. Bilyeu 81,364, or 41 percent.

In the 1st District, the poll favored Republican Larry Craig over Democrat Glenn Nichols 34-27 percent with 39 percent undecided. In the election, Craig amassed 116,845, or 53.7 percent; and Nichols 100,697, or 46.3 percent.

The old saying the only poll that counts is the one on election day becomes crystal clear.