# Pioneer Days

*The promise of online polling*

### By Anna Greenberg and Douglas Rivers

It is clear that Campaign 2000 served as the first great experiment of online survey research with electoral politics. Numerous organizations attempted to forecast the outcome based on internet straw polls and panels, experimented with online debates and focus groups, and creatively employed multimedia technologies to test reactions to campaign ads and debates. Other ventures tried to sell information about their registered users as "public opinion data" and recruited their members to participate in focus groups for clients.

As we face declining telephone response rates and the limitations of phone technology, we need to assess how well online polling takes our nation's political pulse and fosters innovative ways to measure our preferences.

Knowledge Networks is a firm that conducts commercial and political research for a wide variety of corporations, media outlets, and political and non-profit organizations. Formerly known as InterSurvey, Knowledge Networks maintains a nationally representative, web-enabled panel, recruited using random digit dialing telephone methodology.[1] Every participating Knowledge Networks household receives free hardware, free internet access, free email accounts, and ongoing technical support. Participants receive a short multimedia survey about once a week. Surveys are delivered by email on the same standardized hardware, through the television set.

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Because Knowledge Networks' sample includes respondents previously with and without internet access, it overcomes some of the sampling challenges facing other online ventures. Panel weights are applied to correct for unequal probability of selection due to multiple phone lines, and post-stratification weights are based on Current Population Study data.

While Knowledge Networks did not attempt to forecast the election outcome in 2000, the organization conducted national sample polls throughout the electoral cycle. These data consistently yielded results remarkably similar to simultaneous phone surveys. For example, a survey of likely voters conducted for iVillage.com in late September 2000 showed Al Gore with a 3-point lead over George W. Bush, a result comparable to a series of telephone surveys from the same period.

This recurring consistency suggests that the Knowledge Networks panel produces accurate information. It also, however, masks a significant mode effect in online surveys. In our experience, there is a relatively higher "don't know" or "undecided" response with online surveys. Without interviewers to probe "voluntary" don't know responses further, respondents frequently remain undecided.

This effect was demonstrated in a late 1999 Knowledge Networks survey conducted for *The Washington Post*, in which Gore received 38% of the vote and Bush received 48%, while 14% remained undecided. In a simultaneous phone survey commissioned by ABC News/*Washington* Post, Gore garnered 39% of the vote, Bush received 55%, and only 1% offered no opinion. Similarly,

Knowledge Networks surveys conducted during the primary season yielded higher levels of undecided response than polls that pushed respondents to make a choice.

One significant advantage of web interviewing is the low cost of contact, compared to traditional telephone methods. Knowledge Networks, like nearly every other polling organization, tracked vote intentions over the fall campaign. Unlike most other organizations, however, Knowledge Networks was able to reinterview the same respondents immediately following the election.

With a sample of 17,704 adults, the post-election reinterview conducted from November 8-15, 2000 was able to identify defections of Ralph Nader voters (mostly toward Gore) as well as a swing of undecided voters over the weekend (again in Gore's favor). Twenty-eight percent of respondents who said that they intended to vote for Nader ended up voting for Gore, compared to 13% for Bush. This is consistent with strategic voting behavior (voting for the second most preferred candidate to avoid casting a wasted vote). Gore also garnered 55% of the pre-election undecided voters, compared to 33% for Bush and only 6% for Nader. The late shift toward Gore helped account for the closeness of the race, even as the public polls showed Bush with an approximate 2-point advantage on Election Day.

An additional benefit of web interviewing is its suitability for conducting complex and interesting experiments. For example, in a study designed by Simon Jackman, Josh Clinton and Doug Rivers (all of Stanford University), panel members rated the relative impact of potential

vice presidential picks on their propensity to vote for Bush or Gore. Approximately 8,000 panelists were given 40 different hypothetical match-ups, pairing Bush with Elizabeth Dole, Frank Keating, John McCain, Colin Powell, Tom Ridge, Fred Thompson and Christine Todd Whitman, and Gore with Evan Bayh, Bill Bradley, Richard Durbin, Diane Feinstein, John Kerry and Robert Rubin.

Leaving aside the poor prognostication about the eventual vice presidential selection, the experiment yielded interesting results. Not surprisingly, Bush/Powell and Bush/McCain easily defeated any Democratic ticket, while the Gore/Bradley match-up was the strongest Democratic pair. More remarkably, female candidates such as Elizabeth Dole and Christine Todd Whitman greatly strengthened the Bush ticket, which beat every Democratic pair with the exception of Gore/Bradley. Moreover, selecting a female vice presidential running mate muted the gender gap, leading to greater support for Bush among women voters.

Another series of experiments used Knowledge Networks' audio-visual and experimental design capacity. In a study commissioned and designed by David Magleby of Brigham Young University, participants in the Knowledge Networks panel evaluated election advertisements produced by candidates (hard money), party committees (soft money), interest groups, and pure issue campaigns. The aim of the study was to determine whether interest group advertising and soft money ads adhere to the intent of *Buckley v. Valeo*, which permits independent expenditures by groups of individuals on behalf of candidates as long as an ad does not explicitly advocate the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate.

In the experimental design, a pair of each ad type was selected. All respon-

dents saw three of the eight commercials in random order to create eleven treatment groups, such that every pairing of ads was seen by at least one group. When asked the purpose or objective of the interest group advertising, panelists clearly believed that the interest group ads were urging them to vote for or against a particular candidate. Less than 10% considered these ads as primarily concerning issues, while 80% thought the ads suggested they vote a particular way in the election.

A second multimedia study compared the results of online "insta-polls" conducted during the presidential debates with post-debate telephone insta-polls. Using the Knowledge Networks panel, CBS News pre-recruited a national sample of registered voters to log in at a particular time on the night of the debates. After answering an initial screening question on whether or not they watched the debate, panelists were asked a series of questions about the candidates' performance.

When the results of the CBS News/Knowledge Networks online insta-poll were compared to post-debate telephone surveys by ABC and CNN, the former was found to be more likely than the latter to favor Gore in the debates, both in the pre-debate vote choice and in assessing the debate winner. Other national insta-polls had their own biases—ABC News and CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup showed larger Bush leads in their pre-recruited panels than in their own daily tracking polls.

The Knowledge Networks panel, and online survey research more generally, holds even more potential to conduct public opinion research in innovative and creative ways. The technology permits the use of multimedia content with much larger samples than central facility work, such as focus groups. It allows for sophisticated experiments of the type permitted by Computer

Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), such as randomization, split sampling, and branching schemes with visual material.

Internet panels can also target subpopulations more efficiently than telephone surveys because they maintain detailed demographic and behavioral information on respondents. This allows researchers to target surveys to low-incidence populations, such as Jewish Americans, African Americans, users of particular products, or opinion elites. The panel design creates flexibility, allowing the researcher to conduct follow-up interviews with particular respondents.

As its panel size increases, Knowledge Networks will have the ability to study specific congressional districts or target even more specialized subgroups, such as single-issue voters. We are further refining the capability to utilize dial-meter technology and online focus groups, in which participants electronically register their reactions during the course of an event. CBS News utilized this technique during the third presidential debate. The resulting data provided a second-by-second time series of voter reactions to specific candidate response and demeanor.

We have no doubt that the online experiment will continue as more firms and organizations attempt to harness the power of the web in measuring public attitudes and preferences. The challenge for the survey research community is to maintain the integrity of the data and the spirit of innovation as we incorporate the increasingly sophisticated technology and speed offered by the internet.

**Endnote**

[1]See www.knowledgenetworks.com/science/methodology.html for more information.