Silly Polls
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Today polling is serious business. The industry employs thousands and generates millions in annual revenue. And today's polls seriously matter. Political campaigns rise and fall on the basis of them, and they often influence public policy.

But while polling is serious business, not all polls are serious. There is in fact a large and growing category of polls known as "silly polls," whose main purpose is entertainment. We typically see silly polls most often during presidential elections. In 2004, we are likely to see lots of them. And maybe that is good--a little levity in this solemn election year cannot hurt.

There are actually two types of silly polls, the so called "popcorn polls" and the "folklore polls." The popcorn polls go back to 1964 when Republican Barry Goldwater challenged Democrat Lyndon Johnson for president. The owner of a cinema put pictures of the rival candidates on adjacent popcorn poppers, and then called the media to report Johnson popcorn was outselling Goldwater popcorn two to one. The poll gained some popularity when Johnson did eventually trounce the hapless Goldwater on Election Day.

Since 1964 mutations of the popcorn poll have multiplied prolifically. There are at least five subtypes:

- **THE BUMPER STICKER POLL** -- This is one of the best-known sillies. Bumper sticker polls measure support for a candidate by counting the number of bumpers displaying a candidate's name or slogan. Unfortunately, evidence exists that suggests most people have no idea what is stuck to their bumper. This fact, however, has done little to suppress enthusiasm for those using bumpers to read the political tea leaves.

- **JELLY BEAN POLL** -- Another well known silly, it requires strategic placement of two identical bowls of jelly beans, labeled Republican/Democrat, Bush/ Kerry, etc. The last surviving jelly bean(s) loses the poll. Some research suggests that voters on a diet get under counted in Jelly bean polls.

- **THE T-SHIRT POLL** -- This one works by observing and counting candidate endorsements worn on T-shirts. This poll seems to be particularly accurate for measuring strength of support in colder climates.

- **THE MAGAZINE COVER POLL** -- These gauge candidate support by comparing how well or poorly a magazine sells when it features a candidate on the cover. Politicians as a class do not move magazines well, so often this silly poll is a race to the bottom. Exceptions include candidates recently indicted, under investigation or otherwise embroiled in a juicy scandal.

- **THE TOILET FLUSHING POLL** -- This one gives new meaning to the phrase "flushed with success." It is designed to simultaneously measure support while dramatizing public opinion in action. Supporters of a candidate are instructed to flush toilets en masse on some prearranged signal. The consequent drop in reservoir levels is supposed to tell the tale.
The popcorn polls are all whimsical--designed to be fun and entertaining. No one would take them seriously or rely on them to predict how an election will turn out. The second type of silly poll, the folklore poll is somewhat different. Like popcorn polls, it also entertains and amuses. But unlike popcorn polls, folklore polls do have a following, and are often written about.

As a class they rely on old beliefs and political traditions to forecast electoral outcomes. Typically they correlate some sporting event, business outcome, or candidate characteristic to winning and losing. For example, the Dow Jones average on Election Day, or the number of letters in a candidate's name is used to predict a winner.

Three of the best known folklore polls look to the height of the candidates, the winner of the World Series, and the winner of the last Washington Redskins game before the election.

- THE TALLER CANDIDATE WINS. This one forecasts the electoral victory will go to the taller candidate. And it has been accurate in 10 of the past elections. But it is not a sure thing. It failed in 1972 (shorter Nixon won) and 1976 (shorter Carter won). It also technically failed in 2000 since shorter Bush beat taller Gore. However, Gore did win the popular vote that year. In 2004, it forecasts a victory for six feet, four inches Kerry over six foot even Bush.

- WORLD SERIES RULE. The rule states that Democrats triumph when the National League wins the series, while Republicans prevail if the American League wins. The World Series rule did work flawlessly from 1952 through 1976, but alas it failed in 1980, and then proceeded to fail for five straight elections until finally eking out an extra innings win in 2000.

- THE WASHINGTON REDSKINS RULE. This one has an impressive winning streak--for 72 years, the victory or defeat of the Washington Redskins in their last game before the election has predicted whether the incumbent party holds the White House. If the Redskins lose or tie, the incumbent party loses the election. If the Redskins win, so does the incumbent party. By any measure the accuracy of the Redskin rule is notable. It has correlated with presidential electoral outcomes in 18 of the past 18 elections back to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932.

Overall the accuracy record of the folklore polls inspires little confidence that they will get it right in 2004. Most of them are wrong almost as often as they are right. And that is what you should expect from a silly poll. They are fun, yes, interesting sometimes, but nothing to be taken too seriously.

But the “Washington Redskins Rule” gets a little more respect. The probability of a Redskin victory or defeat correctly forecasting the presidential election 18 elections in a row has been calculated to be about one in 260 million. For those who like to mix football with politics, the Redskins' last game before the election is with the Packers on October 31.

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