

Young Obama voters flummox pollsters

Scott Shepard, Cox News Service

WASHINGTON - It goes by many names -- the Bradley, Wilder or Dinkins effect -- the tendency of black candidates to do better in the polls than at the ballot box.

The widely circulated theory is that whites will tell pollsters they will vote for black candidates, then vote for their white rivals on election day. But Democratic presidential frontrunner Barack Obama is reversing this trend, doing better in the balloting than in the polls.

The explanation for the absence of what is known among pollsters as "racial leakage" is complicated.

It involves softening racial attitudes in the country, to be sure. But more importantly, Obama is attracting unprecedented numbers of younger and first-time voters, a segment of the electorate that has always confounded pollsters.

"We've always had a problem of who is a likely voter," said Richard Clark, who conducts the Peach Poll for the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. "And with Obama attracting so many new voters, the problem has gotten worse," he said. Pollsters are adjusting their models as a result of Obama, but, "I'm sure we're in for a few more 'oops moments,'" Clark added.

John Zogby, who has conducted daily tracking polls in many of the Democratic presidential primary and caucus states this year, said it is difficult to isolate any one factor affecting the polling on Obama. But of all the factors, he said, two are striking: "There are many more late deciders this year than we have seen ... [and] there are also higher turnouts of younger voters, which affects [Obama's] total."

A survey released Monday for Rock the Vote, a nonprofit organization that has tried to mobilize young voters since 1990, estimated that an unprecedented 7 million Americans under the age of 30 have voted in the presidential primaries and caucuses so far this year, an overwhelming majority of whom have supported Obama.

"Since we've had polling data, we've never had young people pay this much attention this early," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who conducted the Rock the Vote survey last week with Republican pollster Ed Goas.

"This is not an angry generation. It is an energized generation."