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Winner at Picking Electoral Vote

By CHARLES FORELLE

Sam Wang and his computer look pretty smart.

Since the summer, the Princeton University neuroscientist has enlisted the tools of statistical modeling to project the outcome of the Electoral College.

The computer's final pre-election call, based on state-by-state polls: 286 votes for President Bush, 252 for Sen. John Kerry. It appeared likely as of last night that the projection would turn out to be on the nose. (Iowa's seven electoral votes haven't been put in the Bush column, though the president has a small lead there.)

Statistical modeling of election polls was a popular sport this fall for numerically minded political junkies who published their findings on the Web. Several amateur prognosticators, including Mr. Wang, were featured in a page-one article in The Wall Street Journal last week. Their sites were frantically monitored by loyal readers as the polls swung to and fro.

Mr. Wang isn't wholly pleased. For

one, he is an avowed Democrat. He also made a personal prediction—311 electoral votes for Mr. Kerry—that was way off the mark, because he added extra points for the Massachusetts senator to the raw computer results. The theory was Mr. Kerry would be boosted by high turnout and late-deciding voters. “Those assumptions were evidently wrong,” he said.

Andrea Moro, an economist at the University of Minnesota, stuck to the raw numbers and picked Mr. Bush. His last calculations on two sets of polls both divined Bush wins—an average of 278.7 electoral votes in one, 273.5 in the other.

The various models' exact workings differ, but they share a similar blueprint. They use results in state polls to calculate a candidate's probability of winning that state, then calculate likely Electoral College outcomes from those probabilities. The prescience of some of the models suggests that the underlying polls—which had been derided for potentially missing young voters, cellphone-toters and others—turned out to be rather accurate.