

Television's Performance on Election Night 2000
A Report for CNN

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I. THE CHARGE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMITTEE

The three authors of this report were asked by CNN to constitute an independent committee to investigate the performance of CNN and to make findings and recommendations.

Specifically, Tom Johnson, chairman and CEO of the CNN News Group, asked us to determine: What went wrong at CNN? Why did it happen? What should be done to guard against a recurrence in future elections? He gave us the freedom to question whomever we wished, to obtain any documents we wanted, to write a report that would be made public reaching whatever conclusions seemed warranted.

At the root of Tom Johnson's three questions we found two other broader ones that deserve consideration: What were the networks doing? Why were they doing it?

II. PREAMBLE

On Election Day 2000, television news organizations staged a collective drag race on the crowded highway of democracy, recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the country, and their own credibility, all for reasons that may be conceptually flawed and commercially questionable.

Their excessive speed, combined with an overconfidence in experts and a reliance on increasingly dubious polls, produced a powerful collision between the public interest and the private competitive interests of the television news operations and the corporations that own them.

Their hyper-competition stemmed from a foolish attempt to beat their rivals to the finish line in calling state-by-state winners in the presidential election, foolish because few in the crowd knew then or know now which network got the checkered flag most often. Foolish because each network funded its competitor's work. Foolish, too, because their haste led to two mistaken calls in the state that turned out to hold the key to the outcome of the election. All, in turn, played an important role in creating the ensuing climate of rancor and bitterness.

Those calls and their retractions constituted a news disaster that damaged democracy and journalism.

III. INTRODUCTION

The results of the United States presidential election of 2000, conducted on November 7, were not finally known until 36 days later, making this election one of the most drawn-out, confusing, acrimonious and controversial elections in the nation's history.

The confusion and controversy began on Election Night itself, when the television networks committed serious errors in their reporting of the election returns.

Most serious were:

The report that Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, had won the key state of Florida, followed later by a retraction of that report.

The report that Texas Governor George W. Bush, the Republican candidate, had won Florida, and with it the presidency. This led to Gore's personal concession by telephone to Bush, based on the erroneous information.

Yet another retraction by the networks, this time on the Bush call.

The erroneous Gore calls were made by ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, and NBC, as well as by the Associated Press. The later Bush calls were made by the five television networks but not by the AP.

The uncertainty about who had won Florida, engendered by the closeness of the Florida contest, but exacerbated by the mis-reporting, turned out to play an unhealthy role in the subsequent tense and potentially dangerous post-election controversy until the final determination of the race after more than a month in a climate of public rancor. How much television news contributed to that climate is speculative, but surely it was an important factor.

Our inquiry has included extensive face-to-face interviews with personnel from CNN, from AP, from Voter News Service — the consortium set up by the five networks and AP to tabulate election results through exit polling and other means and to convey results to the six clients — and from the joint CNN/CBS “decision team” that evaluated VNS information and advised those two networks when to “call” a state. In addition, we gathered extensive published information, both historical and current, concerning broadcast coverage of this election and previous ones.

Tom Johnson told us in an interview that he regarded television's handling of election night as “a fiasco,” that he took personal responsibility for what happened, and that he felt “a real sense of embarrassment and shame” at CNN's performance. That said, it should be noted generally that CNN personnel, on-air and off-air, including Johnson, are honorable television news professionals and among the most responsible in the nation. At the same time, serious mistakes were made by CNN, as they were at other networks.

Our findings and comments are detailed later in this report, but a summary of key findings and recommendations follows:

IV. SUMMARY FINDINGS

CNN and other television networks, while acting within their legal and journalistic rights, failed their journalistic mission and reported the 2000 presidential election in a way that improperly interfered with the election process.

In calling winners of individual states based on exit polling and votes from sample precincts, accuracy and completeness of information were sacrificed to the pressures of competition. The desire to be first, or at least not to be consistently behind the others, led the networks to unwisely make calls based on sketchy and sometimes mistaken information.

With regard to some states with more than one time zone and different poll closing times, CNN and others did not always wait until all polls were closed in those states before calling a winner. One such state was Florida, where CNN projected Gore as the winner 10 minutes before polls closed in the state's western panhandle, which contains 5 per cent of the population and where, as in most polling places, voters on line at poll closing time may still cast their ballots. Viewers were not told that those polls still were open. Viewers were told the Florida polls closed at 7 p.m., when in fact the polls in the panhandle closed an hour later at 7 p.m. Central Time.

Whether, and how much, such calls affect intrastate voter turnout in the remaining minutes is not known, nor is the impact of calling a winner upon voter turnout and behavior in other states where polls have not closed. Allegedly conclusive studies usually refer to how small the impact may be. (See Appendix 2)

But presidential elections are too sacred a part of our democratic system to take such a risk. And as Florida showed, a few votes can mean a great deal.

CNN and its competitors in fact did not compete in the most vital area of all — the obtaining of data from exit polls, from sample precincts, and from counted returns. All used information provided by Voter News Service (VNS), an organization jointly owned and governed by five networks and the AP. CNN neglected to identify the source of the information, a serious breach in the journalistic commitment to disclose sources when possible. VNS performed its task inadequately, and the CNN/CBS decision team failed in important instances to consult other available sources of election returns.

Our inquiry indicated serious flaws in the polling methods used by VNS, including exit polling, outdated polling models and outdated technology, in a circumstance of changing public attitudes and changing socio-economic patterns. The impact of early and absentee voting is not fully known or accounted for. Similar problems erode the validity of precinct models. There was a recognition well before the election that the VNS technology was not up-to-date, but the owning partners did not upgrade it. VNS also committed errors in vote tabulation in Florida.

Exit polling is extremely valuable as a source of post-election information about the electorate. But it has lost much of the value it had for projecting election results in close elections. The number of people who decline to respond to exit polls, combined with the increase in the number of early and absentee voters who are not reached by exit polls, are making the results of such polls less reliable with each election cycle.

In any case, exit polls, whether accurate or not, are self-generated news. Their use by television networks to project election results is an attempt to forecast what is not

yet known — the actual vote count — but which will be known within a few hours when the votes are counted. This, combined with the questionable reliability of the exit polls and statistical analysis of a few sample precincts, led to serious mistakes committed by the networks in an attempt to gain a few minutes of competitive advantage.

The CNN/CBS decision team also performed badly. It did not adequately evaluate VNS information and did not make appropriate use of other information available through AP and through county voting operations and secretary of state websites. Consultation with these additional sources might have prevented at least the second call of Florida that had to be retracted.

CNN made little effort to inform its viewers about the source of its election-returns information, nor tell them that virtually all the information was coming from one source jointly employed by it and its competitors. It was not made clear to viewers that winners were being called in various states based mainly on statistics, models, and exit polls, not on actual counted votes.

CNN did not report to viewers until very late in the process that the closeness of the Florida vote would likely lead to a mandatory recount under Florida law.

There have been some allegations of political bias, either intentional or unintentional, in the reporting of election results, including charges that “Gore states” were called sooner than “Bush states.” We have examined the evidence for this claim and have seen no indication of any kind of bias on the part of CNN. We strongly doubt any intentional bias in the VNS system, but we are not equipped to definitively answer whether unintentional bias may exist in polling and vote sampling techniques, or if it does, to what extent it exists. (See appendix 3 and 4.)

While our inquiry was requested by CNN as an evaluation of its performance, much of what we found related to systemic faults shared in one way or another by all the networks.

Their Election Night mistakes brought to light serious problems that warrant further study and correction. For now, we offer a set of recommendations to CNN, many of which apply to other networks as well.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

We make the following recommendations to CNN for use in future elections.

General: There are a variety of specific fixes that have been advanced to correct the mistakes made in 2000 in time for the 2002 and 2004 elections. That may be sufficient, and we cite some useful ones below, some new, some not. But we urge, too, a careful reconsideration of the entire concept of early presentation of election results on Election Day. What are the benefits? What are the costs?

The benefits flow straight from the journalistic ethic: getting the news accurately, getting it first, and reporting it when it is known.

These are sound instincts. For all but a couple of hours every four years, this is a creed that generally serves America well and, indeed, has produced journalistic professionalism unmatched in the world, to our lasting credit. But those several hours, when most, but not all, votes for President have been cast, but not counted, may deserve a second look. And costs must be considered.

The Presidential election is unique; it is the only one that is national and continental in scope, albeit indirectly through separate winner-take-all contests. Any interference, or potential interference, or perceived interference, in that process should be scrutinized. Elected officials of every persuasion denounce the enterprise in general and, specifically, claim it distorts voting patterns in non-Eastern time zones, for the presidency and for “down-ticket” races. (See appendix 1.)

We do not know whether, or to what extent, early election calling influences behavior while the vote is in progress. The academic judgments on this matter vary widely. But most would concede that there may be at least be a small effect, of indeterminate direction. Florida taught that small numbers of votes in a winner-take-all system can have enormous leverage, and engender great passion.

There is no shortage of angry Americans who at any given moment believe something “unfair” has happened in the world’s model democracy. The weeks following the Florida election led to complaints about bias and/or lack of competence in the broadcast media, and helped set an angry tone in the country concerning the outcome of the election.

One would think that only great benefit might tempt major news organizations to risk placing even an extra twig on that fire. And all for what?

This is the broad question we have asked ourselves, but have not answered. It is the one that the television networks should be asking of themselves.

Exit polling for projection purposes: Cease the use of exit polling to project or call winners of states. The 2000 election demonstrates the faults and dangers in exit polling. Even if exit polling is made more accurate, it will never be as accurate as a properly conducted actual vote count, and the current network practice of sacrificing accuracy to speed should be reversed.

Sample precincts for projection purposes: The use of returns from sample, or key, precincts for projecting or calling winners also should be halted. These precincts, thought to provide a representative sample from which larger results can be extrapolated, are subject to numerous errors and in a close election such as that in Florida in 2000 can lead to faulty calls. Any use of sample precincts should be carefully limited to guidance in looking at and evaluating actual counted returns

Use of actual returns: Calling of states should be based on actual counted returns. A state should not be said to have voted for a particular candidate until enough votes have been counted to make the outcome in that state a certainty. Any statements broadcast prior to that time should be limited to stating who is leading and with what percentage of the vote counted.

Calling of states where some polls are still open: In states where not all polls close at the same time, no call should be made until all the polls in that state are closed. This would help reduce inaccuracies and would eliminate the possibility that an earlier call may affect turnout in portions of the state where polls remain open. This recommendation may seem unneeded if our other recommendations are followed because of the time required to count actual votes. But that is not necessarily the case, particularly if future automated voting systems produce nearly instantaneous results after polls close.

Withholding results until all polls are closed nationally: Our task is to present recommendations to CNN, and by implication to other networks, not to recommend to state or federal governments. But we take note that many legislative suggestions have been made aimed at improving the electoral process, recently and after past elections. Congress has considered the adoption of a uniform poll closing law so that polls would close at the same time everywhere. Another avenue for examination concerns encouraging states to delay release of voting returns in their states until polls are closed in the Western states. While such actions might eliminate most of the problems that reached full flower in 2000, we take no position on such ideas. In any event, we do believe that CNN and other networks should not delay making necessary reforms in their policies on the assumption that any such changes will happen.

Exit polling for analysis purposes: CNN should commission an independent study of exit polling, to determine whether and how it can be made more accurate. Exit polling provides valuable information about the electorate by permitting analysis of such things as how segments of the electorate voted and what issues helped determine their vote. Total elimination of exit polling would be a loss, but its reliability is in question. A non-partisan study commission, perhaps drawn from the academic and think-tank communities, is needed to provide a comprehensive overview and a set of recommendations about exit polling and the linked broader problems of polling generally.

Voter News Service: If CNN and its partners in the Voter News Service consortium decide to continue the use of VNS, it should be fixed or re-invented. The networks received nearly all their election-night information from this one source, and too much of the information was wrong. We seriously question the concept of a single source of information, used collaboratively to poll and tabulate elections. The system, adopted for cost-saving reasons, lacks the checks and balances required for reliable reporting. All of VNS's assumptions, models, and practices related to exit polling, sampling, vote tabulation, and the like should be re-examined. Whether VNS's computer technology, staffing levels, and other operations are adequate also should be examined. This will be costly to the networks, but is essential if use of VNS is to continue. In addition, the partners should direct VNS not to release to them, or to anyone else, the early waves of their polling until much later in the day, to prevent the leaks of this data that now are rampant in the journalistic and political communities.

Second Source: CNN, and hopefully the other networks, should commission an academic institution to conduct a parallel national exit poll to provide journalists and the public with better information on voting patterns.

Decision team: CNN should strengthen its decision team, whose job is to take election night information and recommend when a state can safely be called for a winning candidate. In the 2000 election the decision team, which CNN shares with CBS, made a number of important mistakes, because of haste to make calls and because it failed at important times to check information available from AP and from state election sources against information it was receiving from VNS. CNN should direct its team to consult as many sources as possible before recommending a call, even if that materially slows down the process. CNN obviously saves money by sharing a decision team with CBS; we do not make a specific recommendation about this but we observe that when the team makes an error two networks, rather than one, receive bad information.

Informing viewers: CNN did a poor job on election night of informing viewers about the source of its information. The systems used to come up with vote totals and calls of states should be made much more transparent to the viewers. The activities of VNS and the network's decision team should be fully described on numerous occasions during the coverage. Language used in calling states should be accurate. Projections should not be stated as fact. Where a state's result is not yet known, differentiation should be made between a state truly being "too close to call" or one simply having a slow vote count. Networks should avoid certainty in giving results that are not certain and use words such as "likely" and "appears" more often. The more viewers are told about the process, the more credibility the network will have. As a public service, viewers could frequently be encouraged to go vote and reminded that their vote counts.

Accuracy over speed: Whether networks are trying to come in first, or simply trying not to come in last, it is very clear that the competitive zeal to report election returns quickly led the networks badly astray in covering the 2000 election returns. CNN should clearly emphasize that it prefers accuracy over speed in reporting election returns, and its performance should make it clear that this emphasis is genuine. We hope that all networks adopt such a policy. All would no doubt say that they follow such a policy now, but their actual performance on Election Night 2000 makes such an assurance hollow. All our recommendations are aimed at correcting that situation, so that CNN and others can fulfill their obligations not to impinge improperly on the election process and to provide viewers with election information that is as accurate as it is timely.

Effect of changes: We recognize that the practices recommended here would noticeably slow the election night reporting of state-by-state returns and of the overall presidential election outcome. Given the problems noted in this report we do not regard this as a bad thing. To the contrary, we believe such an outcome would result in clear benefits to journalism and democracy.

VI. THE REPORT

Election Night Procedures

CNN's coverage of Election Night 2000 was directed by Sid Bedingfield, CNN's executive vice-president and general manager, and Tom Hannon, CNN political director. Both were located at CNN headquarters in Atlanta. Their task with regard to the presidential election was to decide when to call George W. Bush or Al Gore the winner in each individual state and to transmit that decision to CNN's on-air team, which then broadcast the call.

Information upon which Bedingfield and Hannon based each call came to them from their Decision Team, directed by Warren Mitofsky and Joe Lenski. The Decision Team (Mitofsky and Lenski) was located in New York City. It was a decision team employed jointly by CNN and CBS to serve both organizations as a cost-cutting collaboration. Hannon was in constant contact with the Decision Team by conference call on Election Night.

The Decision Team's data and information came in turn from Voter News Service (VNS), also in New York City but at a different location. Voter News Service is a consortium owned by five broadcast organizations — ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News and NBC — and by the Associated Press, a collaboration among competitors entered into as a cost-saving device. Heading VNS operations were Bill Headline, the director; Ted Savaglio, the associate director, and Murray Edelman, editorial director.

VNS supplied to its owner-members, in waves throughout the day, data compiled from voter exit polls that VNS conducted across the country during the day. It then supplied them with counted vote totals from sample precincts thought to be representative of the likely vote in each state, and eventually it gave them more complete vote counts from each state.

VNS analyzed the data from each state in various computer-assisted ways and determined when the results were clear enough for it to say that one candidate or the other was the winner in that state. Sometimes it reached the decision by the time the polls closed in a state, when no actual returns were yet available and using exit-poll survey data alone. Other times, it waited until sample-precinct returns and other vote counts were available, and sometimes it made no call at all, if and when the data didn't support one.

When VNS told the CNN/CBS Decision Team that a state was ready to call, the Decision Team analyzed the data and, if it agreed, advised the two organizations that the state could be called. Then, it was up to the appropriate officials at each network (Bedingfield and Hannon in the case of CNN) to order the call made or not.

If Bedingfield and Hannon decided to make the call, it was broadcast immediately by CNN anchors Bernard Shaw and Judy Woodruff, who were joined in Atlanta by senior analyst Jeff Greenfield and political analyst Bill Schneider.

The information supplied by VNS to CNN and CBS was provided at the same time to the other VNS members. Because each network and the AP had its own analysts examining the VNS data, it did not all call the winners at the same time, although in most states the calls were clustered very close to one another.

It also is possible for a network to call the winner of a state before VNS does. That is rare, but it happened in the case of the second mistaken call in Florida (the Bush call) as described later.

In summary, the normal path for CNN to make a call in a particular state was:

- VNS analyzed exit polls, sample-precinct returns, and actual returns, and made a call.
- The Decision Team examined the VNS data and told the network it could announce a winner.
- Network officials told on-air personnel that CNN was calling the state.
- The on-air reporters announced the call.

Commentary:

We found this system to be plagued with problems — methodological, statistical, technological and human — and to be a much less exact enterprise than viewers, and even many network personnel, might have believed. Although the system seemed to have worked well in past elections, in the election of 2000 it broke down. According to VNS' own post-election report, its exit poll estimates showed the wrong winner in 8 states. Including all statewide elections, it made 3 wrong calls.

Most seriously, the system badly misfired in Florida, causing the networks, in the words of CNN's senior analyst, Jeff Greenfield, to eat crow, not once but twice. We will address the various points of breakdown in the appropriate sections that follow.

Florida

All along, Florida was regarded by both contenders and their campaigns as a key state, given its 25 electoral votes and advance polls that showed the prospects of a very tight race. Over the course of Election Night, Florida became the key to the outcome of the election.

Working from information provided by VNS, CNN and its competitors called Florida for Gore within less than an hour after most (but not all) the polls had closed in Florida. About two hours later, the calls were retracted.

Another four hours later, the networks, but not VNS nor AP, called Florida for Bush. Some two hours after that, the Bush calls were retracted.

Thus began a period of uncertainty, recounts, and legal proceedings that kept the Florida result and the outcome of the election in doubt for more than a month, until the U.S. Supreme Court settled the matter in a split decision on December 13, overruling a split decision by the Florida Supreme Court.

Although Florida had been recognized as one of three key states in this election, certain facts were missing from early evening coverage, among them:

- That Florida lay in two time zones and that polls in the western panhandle did not close until 8 p.m. EST.
- That in any close election in Florida, with a differential of 0.5% or less between the candidates, a mandatory recount would be necessary.

These factors should have been brought out clearly to provide context both to the decision-making behind the scenes and to the audience waiting for a result. It is not clear that all of these facts were known by each of the journalists responsible for the coverage, or if known, that these facts were judged to be as critical as they turned out to be. They should have been. It was known and reported that Florida was a key battleground state, and that pre-election polls had predicted that the state was too close to call.

Extensive background briefing books on all the races are prepared for the election coverage team, including the producers, the writers and the on-air correspondents. While it is the responsibility of all to know what is in those books, it is a prime responsibility of the executive producer, and his support staff, to have these facts at their fingertips in order to provide them, when relevant, in a timely fashion to the on-air correspondents as corrections or as background.

The on-air correspondents must depend on those producers since they have many other different concerns and responsibilities during the long hours of a newscast—from what they are going to say to how they say it. In fact, earlier in the evening broadcast, political analyst Bill Schneider included Florida in a list of states where polls would close at 7 p.m. EST. The producing staff should have caught and corrected that error immediately. Had they done so, they might later have resisted making any call of Florida before all polls were closed.

Following are the relevant portions of the timeline of that evening:

The Gore call in Florida

5:00 p.m. EST: CNN's on-air coverage of the presidential election begins. Over the next two hours, there are occasional references to Florida, such as correspondent Mark Potter noting that "Underscoring Florida's political importance, Vice President Gore ended his campaign here, with early morning stops in Miami Beach and Tampa... Historically, for Republicans, a win in Florida's presidential race is considered essential. No Republican has made it to the White House without winning Florida since 1924." Anchor Judy Woodruff describes Florida as "just one of several states where the race for the White House is incredibly close."

5:45 p.m.: As part of a rundown on what lies ahead, Schneider says: "In the 7:00 p.m. eastern hour, polls close in nine more states: Florida, Georgia, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio and West Virginia. Total: 106 electoral votes. The big prize: Florida, with 25 electoral votes."

7:00 p.m.: Anchor Bernard Shaw tells viewers, "At 7:00 the polls have closed in certain states and CNN is looking at what is going on. In Florida, this race between Gore and Bush [is] too close to call." Senior analyst Jeff Greenfield adds, "This is the one we will be watching all night. Gore made 19 visits to the state, Bush 13. They've poured in millions of dollars. Fourth biggest prize and it's up for grabs."

In fact, not all the polls in Florida had closed, as noted above. The panhandle of Florida is in the central time zone, and polls there still had another hour of voting

remaining with people on line at poll closing time still able to vote. This information was not broadcast until much later in the evening.

At this hour, VNS exit polling information supplied to the CNN/CBS Decision Team shows Gore leading Bush in Florida by 6.6 per cent. The Decision Team advises its two clients not to project a winner, and the Decision Team decides to wait for some actual vote data to come in.

7:40 p.m.: VNS's computations show a "call status" for Gore in Florida, meaning that statistical models indicate Gore as the likely winner. This is not yet an actual projection of a Gore victory by VNS, but is an alert to its clients to examine the data and to consider whether they wish to call the state.

7:45 p.m.: The Decision Team begins "an intense review" of the Florida race. At this point 4 per cent of the vote had been counted, and it is Bush, not Gore, in the lead by 6 per cent. But other survey data used by VNS and provided to the Decision Team indicate a substantial Gore lead, and early vote counts from sample precincts show an exit poll bias overstating the Bush vote. The Decision Team determines that the probability of a Gore win in Florida is within its guidelines for a call, which means there is a 99.5 per cent probability of a Gore win. Another way to state this is that the team finds only a 1 in 200 chance that such a call could be wrong.

7:48 p.m.: NBC becomes the first network to project Gore the winner in Florida.

7:50 p.m.: CNN and CBS project Gore the winner in Florida. The CNN call is authorized by political director Tom Hannon and executive producer Sid Bedingfield.

"A big call to make," Woodruff tells CNN viewers. "CNN announces that we call Florida in the Al Gore column.."

Greenfield calls this outcome "a roadblock the size of a boulder to George W. Bush's path to the White House. They had counted these 25 electoral votes from the moment George Bush entered the campaign, before he was even nominated"

Correspondent Candy Crowley says the loss of Florida "is not a happy moment for the Bush campaign...it really was one that they counted in their column, that they thought they could use as a base of votes from which to get to that magic 270 [electoral votes needed to win]."

Former Senator Bob Dole, asked how this affects Bush's chances to win the presidency, says "They can still get there, but this certainly makes it tough."

Bill Schneider, CNN's polling expert, uses exit polling information (supplied by VNS although not so identified on the air) to help explain why Gore was the winner in Florida, including the statement that most Florida voters said

their finances had improved in the last four years and that these Floridians “voted very heavily for Al Gore.”

This typifies the tone of the references to Florida over the next two hours, except for the insistence by CNN’s conservative commentator Mary Matalin that there are a huge number of absentee ballots to be counted in Florida and that “when the real count is in...that state’s going to flip.” Commentator Mike McCurry, President Clinton’s former press secretary, dismisses Matalin’s warning as “a little bit of wishful thinking.” (It turns out post-election that the absentee vote in Florida was 12 per cent of the total, as compared to the 7.2 percent assumed in VNS’s computer models for Florida, and that the absentee vote there was 23.7 per cent more Republican than the rest of the votes cast on Election Day).

7:52 p.m.: VNS calls Florida for Gore.

8:00 p.m.: Polls close in Florida panhandle.

8:02 p.m.: By now, all five networks and AP have projected Gore the winner in Florida.

Withdrawing the Gore call in Florida

8:10 p.m.: The CNN/CBS Decision Team continues reviewing Florida data and concludes that the exit poll has underestimated the Gore victory margin by nearly 4 per cent. That, along with other sets of data, makes the team more certain of a Gore win there.

“Even if we had not made the Gore projection at 7:50, we surely would have made the projection looking at this data at 8:10,” the Decision Team since has reported to the two networks.

“In our many years of examining decision screens we do not believe that there has ever been a single instance in which the leader changed in a race in which we had this much data from survey, VPA [Voter Profile Analysis], and county vote and ten estimators all showing a six point lead or more. Presented with this consistent data there was no reason to justify not calling this race. We would not have been doing our jobs if we had not called this race at this time when presented with this data. If we cannot believe data this convincing from VNS the entire purpose of our Decision Team is undermined.”

8:40 p.m.: The Florida decision screens indicate some contradictory information in the data sets, although the Decision Team apparently was not watching them at this point. With 24 per cent of the precincts now reporting statewide, Bush leads by 3 points and in one of the key estimates known as CORE

(based on the county reporting system) by 7.3 points. The VPA estimate still has Gore ahead, by between 4 and 10 points.

9:00 p.m.: The Decision Team is alerted by one of its crew to the CORE lead for Bush. The team begins a review and discovers some problems with the Florida data.

9:07 p.m.: VNS reports to its clients some highly questionable voting data from Duval County. (Later scrutiny determined that a VNS keypunch operator had entered incorrect vote-count data, which had the effect of making it appear that Gore had won 98 per cent of the Duval County vote tabulated up to that time.)

9:20 p.m.: The CORE estimate now shows Gore ahead again, but it turns out this is due to the mistaken Duval County data which has gotten into the estimate.

9:38 p.m.: VNS removes the Duval County vote from its system and sends a message informing its members.

9:54 p.m.: The Decision Team recommends that CNN and CBS retract their Florida calls for Gore. The two do so and are the first networks to retract (AP retracted approximately four minutes earlier). VNS retracts at 10:16 p.m., and all networks have retracted by 10:18.

“Stand by, stand by,” Shaw tells the CNN audience. “CNN right now is moving our earlier declaration of Florida back to the too-close-to-call column. Twenty-five very big electoral votes, and the home state of the governor’s brother, Jeb Bush, are hanging in the balance. This is no longer in the victory [column] for Vice President Gore. We’re moving it back into the too close to call [category]”

Greenfield cracks, “Oh, waiter, one order of crow.”

Woodruff says that “what we’re being told by our executive producer Sid Bedingfield is that based on the information we have from Florida, we don’t entirely trust all the information that we have.”

At that point, Schneider gives CNN’s first description of the calling process and the fact that all the data, such as exit polling and sample precinct results, has come to the network from VNS. “And they’re the ones who provide us with the information that allow us to call the states. We’re normally very cautious. We haven’t retracted, we’ve simply said at the moment that we’re not sure of that call so we’re going to say we’re not ready to confirm it as this point.”

The anchors and correspondents then discuss the impact of the fact that the Florida outcome is now unknown until more votes are counted, and Greenfield concludes:

“Well, you know, listen, there’s nothing more delightful — and I have to say this as a member of the press — than watching an election when you actually have to wait and see what the voters are going to do.”

Commentary:

In studying these events related to the call for Gore and its retraction, we note the brief amount of time between the calls for Gore by the different news organizations and that clearly the “arms race” was on. That kind of competition for a one- or two-minute lead over the competition does not allow for sufficient time for reasoned judgment and decision making, particularly in a state that has so many uncertainties. Florida was key to the outcome of the national election and earlier polls predicted it would be a very tight race. Experience alone should have served to put up serious proceed-with-caution signs.

We also note the use of the word “call” for Gore, based on exit polls, a few sample precincts and only 4 percent of the actual vote, which showed Bush leading. We believe that this language of certainty should be avoided, especially when the evidence is not nearly as substantial as it should have been to make such a call.

We also note that the early Florida call was based on many faulty assumptions:

- an assumption that exit polls are an accurate reflection of actual voting;
- an assumption concerning the number of absentee ballots, which turned out to be wrong by about 5 percentage points (on a base of 7);
- an assumption of the accuracy of the voting samples in key precincts, which also turned out to be wrong;
- the acceptance of 1-in-200 odds for accuracy on the assumption that a proper sample is in use.
- the assumption that accurate calls can be made, even in very tight races, based on statistical odds which are “estimates,” not actual numbers.

For all of those reasons and more, we see in this reporting a lapse of seasoned and reasoned judgment. Seasoned judgment would have required landslide odds before making so early a call in which all advance indicators pointed to a near tie. In ordinary circumstances, those charged with making the decisions accept as a standard odds of 200-to-1 in making a call. In our view, in this particular case, the odds were not sufficient. In fact, the 7.2 percentage points difference between the candidates in an election that turned out to be a dead heat means that when the call was made, the normal calculation of odds of being wrong were vastly greater.

Following the retraction of the Gore call, the warning signals should have been clear for the rest of the coverage. A mistake by a VNS keypunch operator was responsible for sending out wrong data from Duval County. It took time to clear the system of those faulty numbers and to notify the members of the mistake. Fluctuations, variations and contradictions had begun to appear in the basic system, including statistical models. From that point on, extreme caution should have been exercised in making any calls. Prudence demanded waiting for much more complete hard information from as many sources as possible.

The Bush call in Florida

Following the retraction of the call for Gore in Florida, CNN and the other networks tracked the vote count in Florida for the next four hours. Between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m., the figures show a Bush lead, but not one that is certain enough to warrant a call.

During this time, Karl Rove, chief strategist for the Bush campaign, is interviewed by Shaw on CNN and says, "...let me tell you, Bernie, you all called Florida before Florida even closed its polls. Florida is a state which votes in two time zones. The Republican panhandle of Florida is in the central time zone, and you all called Florida before the polls had even closed in Panama City and Fort Walton Beach and Pensacola." Shortly after, CNN commentator Hal Bruno acknowledges that Rove "made a very good point when he said that, you know, the panhandle in there in the west is on a different time zone. That's on central time, not on eastern time, and a lot of votes still had to come in from there."

1:45 a.m.: Shaw reports that Florida is "too close to call." Shortly after, commentator Hal Bruno notes a declining Bush lead and says Florida "has gotten so close now that there's just absolutely no way of counting it until probably every last vote is in."

2:00 a.m.: VNS shows Bush with a lead of slightly more than 29,000 with 96 per cent of the vote counted.

2:08 a.m.: Volusia County reports nearly complete returns that cause a 20,000-vote change in Bush's direction from earlier reports from that county. This information, which turns out later to be a mistake apparently caused by a computer problem, goes into VNS's data and appears to now give Bush a Florida lead of more than 51,000.

2:10 a.m.: The Decision Team seriously considers calling Bush the winner in Florida. Ninety-seven per cent of the precincts statewide are counted. VNS determines that there are just under 180,000 votes remaining to be counted and calculates that Gore would have to get at least 63 per cent of those votes to catch Bush.

Even with votes outstanding in three strongly Democratic counties (Broward, Dade, and Palm Beach), the Decision Team's analysis makes it certain that Bush will win Florida by at least 30,000 votes.

Later, it turns out that there actually were nearly 400,000 votes remaining to be counted. That, plus the 20,000-vote Gore undercount in Volusia County and an additional 4,000-vote Gore undercount in Brevard County that both make Bush's lead look bigger than it really is, lead the Decision Team toward making a call for Bush.

2:15 a.m.: Fox News calls Florida for Bush, giving Bush the presidency.

2:16 a.m.: NBC calls Florida and the presidency for Bush.

2:17 a.m.: The Decision Team completes its review of the Florida data and the apparent Bush lead of some 51,000. However, it bases its calculations on information from VNS and is not checking on vote counts of the AP, which is showing Bush with a

smaller lead and losing ground, or with the vote counts from the Florida secretary of state. AP has just caught the Volusia County error and has restored votes to Gore, so that AP now shows a Bush statewide lead of only about 30,000.

The Decision Team, unaware of this, recommends to CNN and CBS that they call Florida for Bush, and they do so.

Shaw tells CNN viewers: “George Bush, governor of Texas, will become the 43rd president of the United States. At 18 minutes past two o’clock eastern time, CNN declares that George Walker Bush has won Florida’s 25 electoral votes and this should put him over the top.”

Jeff Greenfield adds that “with Florida, he gets 271 electoral votes, one more than he needs. What happens in Oregon and Wisconsin now becomes irrelevant unless by some remarkable miracle some state changes course.”

Much of the discussion over the next hour discusses the apparent Bush victory and the coming Bush presidency.

2:20 a.m.: ABC calls Florida and the presidency for Bush, the final network to do so. AP and VNS have not called Florida for Bush and never do.

2:40 a.m.: The Decision Team relaxes “for the first time all night” as more voting data comes in. VNS shows Bush’s Florida lead growing by just over 4,000 votes to a total of about 55,500 with only 68,500 votes left to be counted. (In fact, there were nearly 250,000 uncounted votes at that time).

With the data it had at 2:40 a.m., “we would have most certainly made the call then if we had not already made the call at 2:17 a.m.,” the Decision Team said in its post-election review. “We would not have been doing our jobs if we had declined to project the race based upon such convincing data.”

2:48 a.m.: Volusia County corrects its mistaken vote totals, and Bush’s statewide lead narrows to 39,600, according to VNS.

3:00 a.m.: Most of the remaining vote from Palm Beach County comes in, which narrows Bush’s lead further to about 11,000. The Volusia and Palm Beach changes make the race so close as to have “eliminated our margin for error,” the Decision Team says later.

At the same time, CNN’s Bernard Shaw is telling the audience: “The United States has a new president. He’s the Texas governor, George Walker Bush, who tonight defeated Vice President Al Gore.”

Correspondent John King reports from Nashville that Gore has called Bush to concede and is on his way to downtown Nashville to deliver concession remarks. Gore’s decision is based, in some large measure, on what television is reporting.

The anchors note that Bush’s lead appears to be only about 11,000 votes out of 5.6 million cast.

3:10 a.m.: The Bush lead narrows to 10,000, and the Decision Team for the first time starts looking at vote counts from the AP and the Florida secretary of state’s web

site. All have differing numbers, but all show the race has narrowed dramatically. VNS has provided no information on what caused the change.

3:15 a.m.: The Decision Team alerts VNS's Murray Edelman to the questions concerning the Florida vote. VNS begins looking at its data. Meanwhile, the Decision Team compares county vote totals from the secretary of state to the VNS vote count and finds discrepancies in seven counties.

On air, CNN's Judy Woodruff is wondering aloud whether "the vice president may be hesitating because of this popular vote count that is so close," and John King says "CNN is double-checking the vote count, county by county." Shaw adds, "Were I Al Gore, I don't think I'd be that terribly much in a hurry to rush out there and make the concession."

King quotes unnamed Gore aides as saying that with the results as close as they appear to be, Florida law mandates an automatic recount.

3:40 a.m.: Bush's lead falls to 6,060 votes.

Correspondent Candy Crowley reports that "the vice president has recalled the governor and retracted his concession."

Woodruff tells viewers that CNN is checking vote discrepancies between VNS, the AP, and the Florida secretary of state.

She, Shaw, Greenfield, and Schneider conduct a lengthy telephone interview with a Florida elections official who explains the state's recount law.

3:57 a.m.: Bush's lead is less than 2,000 votes. The Decision Team advises CNN and CBS to retract the Florida call for Bush, and they do so, with the other networks retracting shortly after.

Florida, once blue for Gore on the CNN map, then red for Bush, returns to yellow for undecided.

"As it was explained to me when we did this," says Woodruff, "it means that while we still believe that George W. Bush will have the advantage in votes in the state of Florida, we do not believe that he will have enough of an advantage over Al Gore to avoid a recount."

4:10 a.m.: Bush's lead drops to just over 1,800 votes, which is about where it stays until subsequent recounts and legal battles begin.

A bit later, after some 12 hours on the air, the CNN anchors and correspondents, obviously frustrated by the declarations, retractions and uncertainties, wrap up their long night without an election result, which was, indeed, the result.

They seem to sense that in some way they have complicated the situation by adding to the public confusion. As Woodruff says near the end of the broadcast:

"You know, it's one thing to say it's a close race, but clearly, part of what's been going on with the rollercoaster nature of it tonight is the fact that we are a news organization.

"And there are news organizations out there that have been anxious to call these results just as soon as we were able to — based on exit polling, interviews with voters as

they left the polling places, and also based on key precincts, sample precincts around the different states.

“So it’s the news organizations that are frankly creating part of what’s going on tonight — the atmosphere, the ups and downs.”

Commentary:

Here we have a chronicle of a tragedy of errors. The call for Bush by CNN/CBS is a catalogue of practices and habits that serve to undermine journalistic accuracy and credibility. The following is a partial listing of actions that add up to the unacceptable performance of the news organizations that evening:

- There was almost no communication between VNS and its membership in the critical hours leading up to the Bush call.
- Inadequate quality control at VNS (later admitted in a self-study) failed to catch the computer error in Volusia County. Consequently, the error entered the system. This was compounded by the fact that the error was not communicated to the members, even after it was detected.
- Other errors entered the VNS system for a variety of reasons. VNS became increasingly aware of this, but because of a lack of communication, it did not provide warnings to its members.
- One report points out that some VNS personnel were released early that evening. While it was explained that those personnel were deployed in areas where the outcome was decided, we believe that all hands should have been on deck when faced with the uncertain situation in a key state like Florida, particularly following the faulty Gore call and the mistake in Duval County. Personnel working in other areas might have been deployed to the Florida count, at least to man the phones and bring added strength to checking all possible sources. As we see, the number of serious VNS mistakes are compounded throughout this critical time period, mistakes that might have been avoided.
- There was no ongoing direct communication between VNS and the CNN/CBS decision team. There should have been a direct tie-in used constantly. There was an open line from VNS headquarters to CNN throughout the evening. We can only conclude that it should have been used more.
- It wasn’t until after 3 a.m. that John King made the first reference of the evening to an automatic mandatory recount in Florida. That was critical information that should have been reported much earlier.
- CNN, along with others, was driven by what appears to be a compulsion, both because of competition and because of the desire to satisfy perceived audience demands to provide an election result — even if there was not one. Ironically, an election that is too close to call is itself a unique news story that should have kept viewers rapt for as long as it lasted. But a news environment that cultivates the urge to a definitive conclusion impelled CNN, and the other networks, in such a way as to contribute to the inaccuracy of the reporting that evening and the resulting confusion that followed the election.
- We applaud AP for holding back its Bush call in the face of so much uncertainty. And we respect VNS’s decision not to call the race, noting that it was much more aware

than its members of all the errors found in its system that evening. At the same time, we fault VNS for not conveying the problems and irregularities it was encountering more clearly to its members. It was a catastrophic failure.

Findings

The Election Night timeline detailed above is useful in showing what transpired, and when, with regard to the two Florida miscalls. It helps in demonstrating what went wrong, and it highlights the information that was being conveyed to the viewing audience during these crucial parts of the evening.

However, what ultimately is even more important than the exact facts of what went wrong is the underlying philosophy that guides network coverage on presidential election nights. That philosophy is fundamental: to make the outcome of the election known to viewers just as soon as possible, even if that means doing so by methods other than adding up the votes.

On Election Night, current network practices permit calls of states to be made before any or many votes are counted, using exit polls, sample precincts, and partial counts. The data are tabulated, run through computer models, analyzed, and shaped into projections or calls that are believed to be statistically reliable and within such a low probability of error that mistakes will not be made.

In fact, mistakes seem not to be made often, at least not consequential ones, although many errors may occur that do not come to light in races where the outcome is not close. But serious mistakes can be made, as the Florida debacle demonstrates, for a wide variety of reasons.

As our comments and recommendations above indicate, we reject the current philosophy and practices followed by the networks, because we believe that they ill serve the citizenry and the election process. Early calls serve no particular public or journalistic purpose. Taking a long view, it appears they do not even serve a commercial purpose. We believe the networks should return to reporting election outcomes based much more on actual vote counts and much less on the crystal ball of exit polls and sketchy returns. The current process of early calls is made even worse by the fact that all networks are relying on the same information from one consortium. The discussion that follows is based principally on our interviews with the key players from Voter News Service, CNN, the CNN/CBS Decision Team, the Associated Press and others, and on documents provided to us by those groups, and on other materials we have examined.

Voter News Service

Voter News Service was created in 1993, succeeding and combining two earlier organizations, Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) and News Election Service (NES). It was undertaken as a means to expand the reach of polling and as a money-saving measure by the owning partners — the five networks and AP — allowing them to pool their resources in one organization that could provide exit polling information and vote counts for all of them.

But after ABC used its own personnel during the 1994 congressional elections to make calls, sometimes ahead of VNS and thus ahead of its competitors, the other networks created their own decision desks or decision teams to analyze data received from VNS on Election Night.

The result, according to CNN political director Tom Hannon, has been “an arms race” among the networks in an effort to make fast calls on Election Night, although the networks say publicly that they are more interested in accuracy than speed.

VNS operated on a budget of over \$35 million. The partners provided \$33 million for the election cycle culminating in the 2000 election. Another \$2 million was provided by subscribers to the service.

VNS had more than 40,000 people working the election around the country, including those who conducted exit polls during the day and others who phoned the vote totals on Election Night from precincts to VNS headquarters at the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan.

Information from the exit polls was analyzed and released to the VNS clients in “waves” during the day. It is common knowledge that these “wave” results leak to many in the journalistic and political communities at various times during Election Day. This often shapes the coverage to come, even though wave figures may give a quite inaccurate picture of the end result.

Election returns from both sample returns and then broader vote counts were statistically analyzed; added to what was known from the earlier exit polls, these data were what VNS used to figure out who was winning a particular state and to advise its clients when they could call a winner.

Following the election, VNS has conducted an internal review of what went wrong in Florida. A report of its findings was sent to the VNS members in December, and a partially revised updated version in mid-January.

Regarding the mistaken call for Gore in Florida, VNS editorial director Murray Edelman reported to the VNS owners that its analysis at 7:50 p.m. indicated a Gore victory in Florida of 7.3 per cent. An accurate analysis would have shown a dead-even race.

Edelman determined that the 7.3 per cent error resulted from:

- (1) Sampling of voters in exit polls, 2.6 per cent.
- (2) Use of the 1998 Florida gubernatorial election to construct computer models for making vote estimates on Election Night, 2.6 per cent.
- (3) Estimation of the absentee vote, 1.7 per cent. (VNS had estimated that absentee votes in Florida would be 7.2 per cent of the total, whereas there actually was a 12 per cent absentee vote.)
- (4) Quality control procedures working improperly, 0.4 per cent.

This illustrates, Edelman reported, “that the bad estimate was the product of many factors all of which overstated the vote for Gore.” The “most unexpected effect” came from the choice of the 1998 race as the one for comparison. Later study showed that had the 1996 presidential race or the 1998 Senate race been used, “we would not have reached a call status in Florida” for Gore, he said.

“No one using these models expects them to be totally accurate,” Edelman acknowledged. “On the decision screen we display the minimum difference between the top two candidates that we expect to need for us to call a race in safety, taking into consideration the variations in the models.

“This minimum criterion should allow for an error in only 1 out of 200 close races. We also combine our estimate with our prior expectation of the outcome of the

race. In reviewing the 7:50 [call], our estimate met the minimum criterion for calling the race, but after accounting for the absentees it was just slightly over the minimum.”

Although exit polls more often slightly overstate the vote for Democrats, there were signs in the Florida data and from a Kentucky exit poll that exit polls actually were understating the Gore vote. “So even though the size of Gore’s lead was close to our minimum criterion at the time of the call, we had reason to expect an additional margin of safety,” Edelman wrote.

“Was this just bad luck or a deficiency in procedures?” the report continued. “The bad luck is that the problem occurred in such a key state. The reality is that there is some risk in making calls from these models. Prior to this election, these models have been used to call approximately 2,000 races, and only six errors have occurred. The problems in Florida should be seen as part of this longer track record.

“In retrospect, there was not much room for error when the call was made,” Edelman’s report said. He said VNS “may want to review the level of risk that we use in making our calls, especially for races that are expected to be close.” The odds are more like 1 in a million for a miss of 7.2 percentage points.

Use should be made of more than one past race in the estimation procedure, and more attention should be paid to absentee voters, he said. “The absentee vote has been growing over the years and we have had to deal with it in a patchwork method.”

Edelman said VNS also needs to “re-examine our procedures and programs for quality control, sampling and estimation, which were written in the early 1980s.

“And of course increasing the size of our exit poll samples would be an excellent way of stabilizing and reducing the error of the estimates.”

Exit polling has become somewhat more difficult, according to Edelman, because the rate of people who refuse to participate has risen. The number of people who vote by absentee ballot, and who thus are not available for exit polling, also has risen. In Oregon, everyone votes by mail.

Ted Savaglio, associate director, said that VNS needs better technology and vote count systems, although these were partially updated four years ago. Edelman said more funding and more people would permit better quality control by VNS.

In a memo to the VNS partners about the vote-count problems in Duval and Volusia counties, cited earlier in our report, Savaglio confirmed that in Duval County a keypunch error was responsible for the large pro-Gore error. When the mistake was found, it was not corrected promptly in the VNS system. “Everyone involved has been questioned and there is no explanation for why the error report did not result in any action,” Savaglio wrote.

The Volusia County pro-Bush error resulted from counting problems in the county, but they were not known to VNS until it was made aware of the fact that AP was showing a much smaller statewide lead of Bush.

The Bush call in Florida revealed deficiencies in the computer-model assumptions about the outstanding vote yet to be counted and in making this information clear to the network users, VNS found. Better models could have brought to light the underestimation of the outstanding vote in Palm Beach County and the mistaken vote totals in Duval and Volusia counties, according to the VNS team.

“Budget limitations” have held up development of a needed new unified system for combining vote tabulation, projection and analysis functions.

“More sophisticated models” needed to produce better results “wouldn’t be very useful or practical without a new computer system that utilizes a modern graphical interface rather than the very cluttered and outmoded screens we are using today.”

VNS also has called for the hiring of more political editors to review data along with “the tools they need to do the job effectively.” Internal and external communications also must be strengthened, its report said.

After the election, the owner/members of VNS commissioned an outside study of the consortium by Research Triangle Institute (RTI) of Research Triangle Park, N.C., which reported back on Jan. 23 that it had found “a number of deficiencies in the VNS system which, we believe, could lead to a repetition of the unfortunate events that occurred in Florida.”

“We believe that the errors that led to the Gore call in Florida and then the late night shift to Bush were the product of a number of system errors that tended to work in concert at various points in the evening towards favoring one candidate and then the other,” the RTI report said.

It called for VNS to install “stricter quality controls and quality standards,” improve VNS methods for estimating the effect on absentee votes on results, improve the estimating of outstanding votes, and update and simplify its computer technology.

RTI warned that the standard errors reported on the VNS decision screens “tend to importantly underestimate the true total error in the estimates.” The information provided on the screens is so voluminous and complex as to be “prone to misinterpretation, and the rules used for election decision-making are inappropriate, given the continual flow of data into the process.”

RTI noted that VNS had explained to the owners “that inadequacies in their budget have prevented them from making many needed improvements,” in such things as methodology, equipment and even adequate pay to hire qualified field interviewers.

“Nevertheless, if it is important to networks to call elections as early as possible on Election Day while minimizing the risk of an erroneous call,” said RTI, then suggested improvements “may prove to be quite cost effective in the long run.”

An important finding of the RTI report is that “exit poll non-response” has become a “serious problem.” Non-response consists of those who refuse to answer and those who cannot be contacted to interview. The same is true for regular polls, and polling for absentee voting is even more difficult and more costly.

The average response rate in 2000 was 51 per cent, a drop from 55 per cent in 1996 and 60 per cent in 1992, RTI said. “Thus, the response rate is low and appears to be on a downward trend.”

VNS has found little if any relationship of non-responses to survey error, but “we are not convinced that non-response of this magnitude can be safely ignored,” the RTI report continued.

“Further, in our two-day meeting with VNS staff, we were told that the exit polls have consistently over-represented Democrats, which could reflect a bias from non-response.

“Also, the non-response research has focused on the vote question, and the impact of non-response on the other questions [asked in exit poll interviews] could be larger.”

RTI called for “an ongoing research program” to look into “the non-response problem.”

Commentary

The idea that all the television news organizations should collaborate to create one system for exit polling and vote counting on election day is itself questionable. Some have raised legal questions on the basis that such an organization is a violation of anti-trust laws. We offer no opinion about that.

However, it is a general convention of good journalistic practice to seek more than one source for information to be reported, when that information is controversial and open to different interpretations. We believe there should be at least one competitive source available for both exit polling and vote counting.

We note that VNS executives admit that no one expects models to be entirely accurate. This needs to be communicated to the members and to the audience. Because VNS's early calculations are based on models and statistics, they are estimates and estimates only. The break-out of individual factors in the Florida race is interesting, but underneath it all is evidence that the system itself is flawed.

As noted in the interview, VNS's expectations are that calls should be made "in safety."

We question on two grounds its assumption that a 200-to-1 risk of error is acceptable in close races. Moreover, we do not believe that that standard is being met, given the many errors in VNS's 2000 election work, and we do not think it is an acceptable standard in any case. At best, these odds are difficult to validate.

Faulty sampling in key precincts is just one piece of hard evidence that statistical samples can go wrong. At least in this case, Florida sampling as a whole did. This fact, among others, prompts us to call for a commission to examine polling today, of which exit polling is a sub-set. The polling industry as a whole is beset with problems, and they are linked. At a time of extraordinary change and turbulence, it is important to look carefully at all the assumptions underlying polling. We expect that the findings will dictate a more cautious and considered use of polling results.

The explanation that budget restraints were a factor in the poor performance arrives late. Budgets were discussed and adopted by all members and accepted by VNS. All were aware that some of the technology in use was dated and should be upgraded. We are not aware that any further budget demands were made prior to the election.

We see the need for great additional investment if the weakness and flaws in the VNS system are to be addressed, i.e. the issues of training personnel, quality control, additional personnel at polls, better exit polling and more. In addition, there is the need to invest in additional, competitive polling sources for election coverage and to study what procedures might improve evaluating early and absentee voting. The bottom line is that more money is needed from the partners to make VNS (or its replacement) and its competition a more viable and more accurate system.

Regarding such an expenditure, the RTI report raises precisely the right question when it says money should be spent "if it is important to networks to call elections as early as possible on Election Day while minimizing the risk of an erroneous call." We regard that as a very big "if," as our report indicates.

Supporters of the exit polling models maintain that the record on polls has been good for the most part. But we have in this election an example of how serious even one

mistake can be. We note that in that large percentage of successes are many races whose outcome is relatively easy to discern. It is the close called races that are the focus of possible errors. Our exploration leads us to the conclusion that exit polls must be qualified, checked and balanced and used with restraint.

Decision Team

As part of our study, we twice interviewed Warren Mitofsky and Joe Lenski, the leaders of the joint CNN/CBS Decision Team to get their perspective on what went wrong on Election Night.

Both are experienced election analysts with many years of handling polling and election returns. Mitofsky is widely and deservedly recognized as a pioneer and leader in the field.

The Decision Team, numbering a half-dozen professionals, was housed in the CBS building in New York City and was in direct and constant contact with the CNN and CBS control rooms.

In our first interview, in early December, Mitofsky and Lenski explained that the team had three sources of information coming to it from VNS: exit poll data from sample precincts beginning in early afternoon, followed by voting returns from sample precincts, followed by county-by-county returns.

Most of the time was spent looking at states that VNS could not call because they were very close. The team constantly watched for new data and eventually came to a conclusion about close states. In looking at each state, both Mitofsky and Lenski had to agree on the winner before recommending to CNN and CBS that a call be made.

The team did not do its own raw computations and calculations, but used VNS data and then applied its own expertise and analysis.

Both Mitofsky and Lenski agreed that there are problems in the use of exit polls to project races (and in fact proposed some significant changes in their use in their second interview with us in late January, as noted later in this section.)

“The exit poll is a blunt instrument,” said Mitofsky. Lenski said he believes the polls are getting less accurate. They noted that in eight states the final result did not turn out the way exit polls had indicated.

Factors in the declining accuracy of the exit polls include the refusal of people to participate, the rise in absentee voting, and the possibility of poor sampling and interviewing, they said. Mitofsky speculated that the refusal rate is growing because too many questions are included on the exit poll ballots.

Mitofsky and Lenski blame their mistaken calls primarily on the data provided by VNS. As noted earlier, they believe that they would have been derelict in their duties had they not made the two calls on Florida, based on the data supplied to them.

Their complaints include the same ones that have been identified by VNS — particularly the mistakes in Duval and Volusia counties and the underestimates in the outstanding votes in Palm Beach and other counties. The Decision Team first alerted VNS to the Duval error, and the team complains that VNS did not promptly alert it to the Volusia error once it was found and processed into the VNS system.

The team conceded that it made a significant error in relying on VNS data nearly alone. Particularly with regard to the Bush call, following the mistaken Gore call earlier in the evening, “in retrospect” the team should have consulted AP and secretary of state vote counts, Mitofsky said.

“We could have checked every county vote ourselves among the three sources to find the discrepancies, like we did after 3:00 a.m.,” Mitofsky and Lenski said in a written report to the two networks. “Again, that is not really our job, but without massive improvements in the quality control of vote data input at VNS it may have to be part of our quality control in the future.”

Mitofsky told us that he views his job as being “to give information reliably and timely, in that order, to CBS and CNN.”

Thus, he and Lenski said in their report, “We can honestly say that we did not feel any pressure to call the Florida race prematurely. We resisted pressure on other races throughout the evening.” This, they maintained, despite the fact that their job, in such competitive circumstances, is to call a race as soon as possible.

Among those were the fourth electoral vote in Maine “in spite of quite a bit of pushing for a resolution,” holding back the VNS presidential call in Alabama for 25 minutes “until we felt assured that it would stand,” and holding out on calling the Montana Senate race which was close and was key to Republican control of the Senate.

“This being said, we think it would not have been possible to hold out on a call for a Bush presidency [based on a Florida victory] when the data at that time gave us no reason to argue against the call.

“The only argument against calling Bush the winner in Florida at 2:17 a.m. would have been, considering the errors that we have seen in Florida throughout the night ‘we don’t trust the VNS vote count.’ As it turns out that would have been the correct answer, but we had no way of knowing that at that time.”

Critiquing various VNS errors and alleged slowness in making corrections, Mitofsky and Lenski wondered “whether this number of errors in Florida are unusual or whether the VNS performance is uniformly this poor for all states.”

At the time of our second interview on January 26, Mitofsky and Lenski had come up with new recommendations on the use of exit polls, which they had conveyed to CNN. (See appendix.)

The recommendations significantly raise the bar on the use of exit polls. The main change would be that in states where it is not possible to make a call at poll closing time based on exit polling, the use of the exit poll in that state would essentially be dropped from consideration. No call would be made on that state until sufficient data was available from real returns from sample precincts and elsewhere.

The proposed changes result from a belief that exit polling is “less accurate than it was before” and that “we should take exit poll data with caution in making calls,” said Lenski.

Mitofsky and Lenski, believing that current VNS exit poll models are inaccurate in states where the absentee vote is more than 10 per cent, also recommended that phone surveys be conducted in advance in states where the absentee vote is expected to be that high.

Mitofsky said he opposes asking the networks to delay in reporting on any election information they have in their possession, whether from exit polling or from returns that may be reported by a state before all polls are closed in the state. But he said he favors having VNS abandon the release of “waves” of exit poll results to the networks early in the day.

As for reporting of returns, it is up to state officials to decide when to release actual returns (a particular challenge in states where not all polls close at the same time) but networks should remain free to report the returns whenever they are released, he said.

He regards election reporting as being just like any other kind of journalistic reporting, in terms of standards to be used, and does not agree that exit poll reporting amounts to “self-generated news” or produces “a rush to judgment.”

Commentary:

Given that Mitofsky and Lenski agreed that exit polls are “blunt instruments,” we are surprised that these experts allowed the early Gore call to be made, essentially based on information from exit polls.

Mitofsky blames their mistaken calls on VNS data. But both these experts had enough information and experience to have acted with more restraint in both the Gore and Bush call.

In the Bush call, there was ample reason not to trust the VNS figures, which they now admit. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons, they overrode their best judgment. In making that call based on the VNS information, the CNN/CBS decision failed in its primary charge in several critical ways:

- It failed to take into account the warning flags raised by previous errors in the VNS system that evening.
- It failed to bring the proper journalistic skepticism to the VNS numbers. Despite the previous mistakes of the evening and despite the lack of communication, the decision desk accepted VNS numbers as "convincing." At least one other news organization was not convinced about making a Bush call; that is the AP, which was already seeing discrepancies in the numbers.
- It failed to check with VNS before it made its call.
- It failed to check other available sources of information, namely the AP and the official state tallies on the Web.
- It failed to be in touch with Edelman at VNS until one full hour after the call was made.

Nothing in our committee’s review leads us to dispute the Decision Team’s criticisms of VNS, but we believe that the Decision Team’s failure to consult other available sources of data was a major mistake.

We largely discount the Decision Team’s insistence that time pressures were not a problem in calling Florida prematurely. Time pressures are the whole reason for the use of exit polls and other devices in calling the winners of states before the actual computation of complete returns is known. If no one were in a hurry or competing to be out front, everyone would wait until results were known with certainty.

We are not arguing for a lack of competition among news organizations nor saying that every vote should be counted before results are announced. And we do

believe that the networks want to be accurate and to avoid the embarrassment of calls that have to be retracted.

But to say that time pressures are not a factor in when states are called flies in the face of reality.

Although we are far more skeptical of exit polling, and our own recommendations on reducing the use of exit polls for making calls would go much farther, we commend the new suggestions from Mitoisky and Lenski because they would be steps toward slowing down the process of calling winners and reducing mistakes in calling close states. (See appendix 5.)

CNN Atlanta

Tom Hannon

On Election Night in Atlanta, Tom Hannon, CNN's political director, was the point man for receiving information from the Decision Team in New York. When VNS called a state or put it in a ready-to-call status, Hannon looked at the recommendation and reviewed it with executive producer Sid Bedingfield. If both were satisfied, the decision that CNN would call that state was relayed to the on-air team.

Hannon is a CNN veteran, joining the network in 1981 and holding the political director's job since 1988.

Network costs in covering elections went up significantly after 1980, when exit polls began to be used for calling states, not just for describing the electorate, he said.

After the 1988 election, the networks talked and set up their first joint organization, Voter Research Service, a predecessor to today's VNS.

Hannon referred to the 1990 and 1992 elections as "the halcyon days," as each network used the Election Night information supplied to it, did no independent evaluations, and were not under intense pressure to be the first to call results.

This changed after 1994, when ABC announced results ahead of VNS, which led to each network setting up its own decision desk to apply analyses to VNS data and to try to call states as soon as possible.

"I'd love to go back to 1990 and 1992 if the genie could be put back into the bottle," Hannon told us. "I take no pleasure from sweating in a control booth and making egregiously incorrect calls."

At the same time, Hannon rejected the notion that using exit polling to call races is a form of news manufacturing, nor does he think that networks should hold back on disclosing information they know as a way of protecting the political process. "Our business is putting out information," he said.

In an internal CNN memo on the Florida miscalls, Hannon wrote in early December that "we approached Election Night with caution. It was obviously a close election. The pre-election surveys as well as the early exit polls indicated a narrow margin separating the two candidates. An article of faith within the decision group was that any competitive advantage would come from a more efficient analysis of the available data, rather than 'gutting out' calls based on partial information.

"In all the contests we've covered, we've always felt the potential embarrassment of a bad call far outweighed any glory in being first."

Hannon noted that early in the evening CNN deliberately held off on several calls “to give us more data to assess whether a bias was present in the surveys. This occurred in spite of calls in these races by other news organizations.”

When CNN called Florida for Gore, it did so based on “the sufficient and convincing information available from VNS, he wrote, and the same considerations went into the later Bush call.

“Nothing in our previous experience with VNS (or its predecessor VRS) prepared us for the egregious problems this time,” Hannon’s report said. “As recently as this year’s primaries, VNS performed reliably. Until November 7, the service had a commendable record, producing only one bad call in over a decade of projecting election night contests.”

Sid Bedingfield

We also talked with Sid Bedingfield, the executive producer of the coverage, who said “I have to take ultimate responsibility for what happened that night” as the final person to sign-off on the decision to have CNN call a state. He called CNN’s performance “disappointing.”

Bedingfield said his post-election thoughts included the need to investigate the reliability of exit polling and his concern that not enough attention is being paid to sources other than VNS.

“My confidence level in VNS and the models was very high going in. There was not enough skepticism about the whole process.”

The failure to be more skeptical and to hold back longer before making calls “is what keeps me up at night,” said Bedingfield.

On the issue of competitiveness, he said there has been grudging acceptance of the VNS concept, based on a reluctance to have normally competitive networks join in a pooling operation. Sharing a decision desk with CBS also goes against competitive instincts too, “and I would just as soon have an independent operation, but no I don’t think it’s played out in any way that I’ve seen that’s damaging.”

Overall, Bedingfield believes journalistic instincts, not business considerations, guide CNN’s election coverage decisions.

On reporting returns, Bedingfield said, “we always tell ourselves, and we did this time carefully — I led the charge on this — that we would not be driven by what others were doing. And that we would only make calls when we felt comfortable with them, and that if we were last, so be it.”

At the same time, he acknowledged, “we are in a competitive business.” Television critics, he added, often evaluate the networks’ performance in calling races quickly.

As to whether CNN would consider ending the use of exit polling to project winners, Bedingfield said more study is needed to find out if there is a real decline in the accuracy of exit polls which make them too flawed to use. He noted that Judy Woodruff, one of the CNN anchors, favors ending their use for projections but that her argument has not won out so far. It turns out that others of the on-air team also oppose exit poll-based projections.

On-air team

CNN's on-air team of Bernard Shaw, Judy Woodruff, Jeff Greenfield, and Bill Schneider were interviewed by telephone conference call.

The four expressed pride in CNN, combined with a strong dissatisfaction with election coverage procedures that permitted the Florida mistakes. They clearly felt some sense of being hung out to dry, given that, as Greenfield put it, "When we're on the air, we literally have no access to the information itself. We are relying on information given to us by others."

"We are hostages to our process," said Shaw. "When Tom Hannon, who is our respected political director, says in my ear 'we're calling Florida' I accept it and report it."

On the question of exit polling, Schneider, who is CNN's political analyst, said there are more serious problems with the accuracy of the polls than in the past due to non-responses and a rise in absentee voting. He said that taking exit poll information from one source (VNS) is "inherently risky," and that he favors ending their use as "a primary tool in projecting results."

Schneider disapproved from its inception the concept of one source for exit polling. "One exit poll is worse than none. It was a bad idea, and given the latest experience it's still a bad idea."

Shaw said he favors a system of no projections, but believes "the management of the network wouldn't have the courage to do that, given the competitive pressures."

Woodruff said: "I'm one of the Neanderthals who think we shouldn't call any states until votes are counted." At least, she said, "higher hurdles" should be erected to guard against wrong calls.

Woodruff also favors "greater transparency" with the audience in terms of fully informing them of CNN policies and procedures on calling states and other Election Night activities. People with VNS and the Decision Team should be interviewed on-camera to explain to viewers what they are doing. "We've been far too secretive about what we do," Woodruff believes.

Greenfield expressed support for projections, but only if they are properly done, employing "greater restraint and higher standards" before making a call. He finds exit polls a valuable tool for explaining why people voted as they did.

Greenfield compared what happened Election Night to the "Challenger" space shuttle disaster. "There is the pressure to launch and we were trapped by a sense of confidence, which up until a month ago was well placed."

All appeared to favor a policy that would forbid calling the result in any state where any polls are still open, which would alter networks' current practice of not calling a state until most of the polls are closed.

We found these four key CNN personnel to be very thoughtful, dedicated journalists with accurate reporting and the network's credibility being their prime concerns. They believe that CNN routinely provides quality journalism.

But they are troubled that the methods used to quickly call elections (exit polling primarily) were shaky in the year 2000 and believe that pressures to be out front are driving decisions too much at the networks.

Shaw, the most outspoken on this point, said “The network newsroom culture is that decisions are made and actions are taken in ways that are driven by ratings and profits.”

Schneider added, “You cannot perfect an imperfect system.”

Tom Johnson

Tom Johnson, the chairman and CEO of the CNN News Group, told us, as noted earlier, that he felt personal responsibility and “a real sense of embarrassment and shame” over CNN’s Election Night mistakes and regarded television’s Election Night performance as “a fiasco.”

While defending the professionalism of the CNN election team, he said in our interview with him that he wants to do whatever is needed to make election coverage work correctly in the future, doing so in a way that keeps CNN “journalistically sound and financially strong... I want CNN to be even more respected and more responsible.”

Johnson expressed support for an independent study of pre-election polling and of exit polling to see what weaknesses there are in both.

He said he is “wide open” to breaking away from the network pack and covering elections in a different way, as long as it is “reality based.”

CNN had budgeted \$16 million to cover the 2000 election but ended up spending something over \$20 million, not counting the extensive post-election coverage up through the U.S. Supreme Court decision, according to Johnson.

He said he was surprised to learn after the election that VNS was complaining of lack of funding because he had not received a request from them for more.

Johnson said his confidence in VNS and the Decision Team had been shaken, and expressed the view that “the competitive drive to be first played a powerful role” in the bad calls. At the same time, he said CNN “preaches that it’s more important to be right than first.” In the future, “more restraint” is essential, he believes.

Johnson expressed concern that calls of states in the eastern part of the country affect voter turnout in the West where polls are still open. He questioned surveys that claim no such effect. “From my days in California [Johnson was publisher of the Los Angeles Times] I had so many friends who did not go out and vote when they heard that the election was over. I believe it’s an influence, a big influence.”

Regarding the future of VNS, Johnson said he was inclined to either fix VNS’s problems and beef up its future performance or else set up a new system that would stand alone or would compete with VNS.

In addition, Johnson listed four other points that he said were his current thinking to avoid problems in the future, pending the results of this and other studies:

- No calls should be made of states where any polls remain open.
- Exit polling should continue to be done because its use for analysis is so valuable, but the methods must be improved significantly.
- He is mixed on the question of continuing to use exit polls to project results, but if they are used, no calls should be made until more actual votes have been counted and there is a much higher statistical certainty of a correct call.
- Congress should adopt a uniform poll closing law requiring that polls close at the same time throughout the country.

Commentary:

We came away from our interviews with a high regard for the CNN personnel and for their desire to provide quality election coverage, which we believe matched and in some cases surpassed coverage by its competitors. It speaks well of CNN that it created this independent committee with an unrestricted mandate to analyze and find fault.

Despite the professionalism and dedication of the CNN personnel, and for many reasons that involved everyone charged with guarding against error, the wall of defense collapsed.

That speaks to a newsroom environment that is not always in step with the journalistic ideal of putting accuracy above all other concerns. In this case, the pressure of time and the competitive instinct, and perhaps even the internal pressure to be first for commercial reasons, took precedence.

We believe the concern is valid that reporters and critics covering the news media add to the time pressure that builds in the newsroom. Critics very often emphasize and reinforce a value system that is less reliant on journalistic values and more on commercial and competitive considerations. By focusing so much on horse-race issues among the networks, that is the ratings and who comes in first, second and third in calling elections, on who is winning rather than which network was most accurate, most responsible and most insightful and informative, they are, in fact, reflecting commercial, rather than journalistic values.

The result on Election Night was no worse at CNN than at the other networks, but like its competitors CNN suffered a severe setback to its image of competence and integrity. All in authority at CNN took responsibility, and all bear it.

VI. CONCLUSION

A central purpose of a free press in a democratic society is to provide the public with information upon which the people can form intelligent decisions concerning important public matters upon which they have the power to act.

Public-affairs journalism is the pursuit of truth in the public interest, and its major components are accuracy, fairness, balance, responsibility, accountability, independence, integrity, and timeliness.

Those are the qualities that define professionalism, according to the written codes of most mainstream news organizations. It is the commitment to those ideals that make journalists and their organizations worthy of First Amendment protections and accountable to the public.

In its coverage of the 2000 presidential election, television put too high a premium on timeliness and competition, to the detriment of accurate and responsible reporting of Election Night returns.

The supposedly sophisticated system used by the networks to swiftly gather and analyze voting information, so that the American people can be told whom they have elected even before some of them have finished voting and before the votes are counted, self-destructed in Florida on Election Night.

Curtis Gans, vice president and director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, told *American Journalism Review* (January/February issue): "In almost every election there's this rush to judgment, and there's something inaccurate reported. Networks are creating the news by projecting winners, not reporting it. No data is as accurate as tabulated results."

In the same article, it is reported that a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press nine days after the election showed that 87 per cent of the American people want the networks to stop predicting winners before the votes have been tallied.

CNN is one of the premier broadcast news organizations and one of the few whose entire programming is news. Most of its election coverage was of high quality, and it clearly wanted to report the returns with total accuracy. The network offered many hours of very complicated, wide ranging coverage at the highest professional level throughout the evening. The team is experienced, dedicated and committed to the highest principles of reporting. CNN's people, from on-air personnel to the top executives, express anguish over what happened. All that were asked fully cooperated with our study, as promised.

Nevertheless, we conclude that they failed on their core assignment on Election night to accurately inform the public concerning the outcome of the election. On that night, CNN was somewhat of a victim of a system, albeit it one in which it fully participates. We have tried to describe in this report much of what happened and to point out some ways we think CNN can help bring about beneficial changes.

The final judgment of news quality is that CNN's Election Night coverage was a debacle. We note some essential factors in that failure both in the system and within CNN itself.

The supposedly sophisticated system of polling is not nearly sophisticated enough. It is a flawed system that fails to take into full account many dynamic factors—absentee balloting, early voting, demographic change in key precincts, a

declining response rate to polling generally, the quality of questionnaires, vote undercount, mistaken balloting, computer error, human error and more.

Polls have value as pre-election indicators (when they are qualified, more qualified than is now the practice), as post-election analysis and perhaps even as a check or guidepost in evaluating election returns (which are also subject to error.)

But polls are statistical calculations, not factual realities. They are imperfect measures of voter intent and actual voting, especially in very close elections. The overall record of polls in “calling,” or, more accurately, “projecting,” elections appears to be highly successful. In fact, most of those calls are made in states and elections where the outcome is relatively clear-cut and not necessarily evidence of the efficacy of the polling system in today’s voting environment. In the 2000 election, the exit polls, as reported through Voters News Service, were off in 10 per cent of the election calls.

The networks engaged in cost-cutting in forming VNS as a collaborative effort and as a single source of election-returns information, albeit a much expanded polling operation than had previously existed. That is a questionable decision for many reasons.

It eliminates the checks and balances built into a competitive vote-gathering and polling system. It eliminates the possibility of a second source for validating key and possibly conflicting information. The concept of VNS also effectively eliminates competition in the market for the establishment of a second system. It might also stifle journalistic enterprise.

By the nature of a free, competitive market, a second competitive system would act as a check and balance to VNS. In addition, the television news organizations introduced an element of competition by establishing their own “decision desks “ to compete and win audience share by making the quickest possible calls of states on Election Night. This practice disguises the fact that each of these decision desks rely on the same source of information, possibly flawed information, which, in this case, it was. With this system, Florida was a disaster waiting to happen.

We are concerned that bottom-line competition, in which news is subject to the ratings game, drives television news, particularly election coverage.

The networks set up VNS as their nearly sole source of election-returns information. Then, in an effort to compete and win audience share, they formed decision teams to take the VNS information and try to use it to make the quickest possible calls of states on Election Night.

In sum, the mistaken calls made television in Election 2000 look foolish. It further affected television’s credibility in the public’s eyes. It also threw one state and the nation and the campaigns themselves into confusion and helped lead one candidate into prematurely conceding to the other.

The first mistaken call for Gore, before a sufficient number of actual votes had been counted and before all the polls had closed in Florida, have led many to charge that Bush voters in the panhandle, where the polls had not yet closed, did not remain to vote, although there is only mostly anecdotal evidence of that.

The unanimous network calls for Bush created a premature impression that Bush was the winner in Florida. That characterization carried through the post-election challenge. Gore was perceived as the challenger and labeled a “sore loser” for trying to steal the election.

Bush supporters claim that thousands of potential votes in the panhandle were discouraged because of the early Gore call. We now know that throughout the country, there is typically a 10 per cent undervote that also disenfranchises voters. In Florida, we had clear evidence that every vote counts, regardless of who wins, and that voting is a process not to be interfered with by television, politicians, election workers or anyone else.

Even as the Bush administration has taken over the reins of government, unofficial efforts to recount the Florida vote continue

Television interfered with the electoral process and the election result. In our opinion, that constitutes an abuse of power, if unintentionally so, by CNN and by all the mainstream television news operations.

Mistakes aside, what happened has focused attention on a television news system that did not serve either journalism or the public well.

Television news did not adequately carry out the role of free journalism in a free society in the 2000 election, and we hope that our recommendations can help improve the performance of television news in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joan Konner is professor and dean emerita of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and an award-winning television journalist. She is former publisher of Columbia Journalism Review. Before joining the Columbia faculty, she worked in both commercial and public television as a producer, writer, director and executive. She produced more than 50 documentaries for NBC News. At WNET/13, public television in New York, she served as executive producer of national public affairs and of Bill Moyers' Journal, Vice President and executive producer of Metropolitan Programming and as president and executive producer of Public Affairs Television, Inc. Konner has received every major award in broadcast journalism, including 15 Emmy awards, the George Foster Peabody Award and the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Award. She has served as chair of the duPont awards, as a member of the Pulitzer Prize Board, and as a juror for the National Magazine Awards.

James Risser is a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the former director of the John S. Knight Fellowships for Professional Journalists at Stanford University. Before joining Stanford, where he now is professor emeritus of communication, Risser reported for the Des Moines Register for 21 years, including nine years as Washington bureau chief. He received a Pulitzer Prize and numerous other awards in 1976 for exposing corruption in the U.S. grain exporting industry and a second Pulitzer in 1979 for exploring environmental damage caused by U.S. agriculture. He served on the Pulitzer Prize Board from 1989-1999, is a member of the steering committee of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, and belongs to the Society of Professional Journalists and Investigative Reporters & Editors.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and Moderator of PBS's weekly program, Think Tank. He writes a weekly newspaper column syndicated by United Media that runs in 200 newspapers. Wattenberg was an aide and speechwriter for President Lyndon B. Johnson and later an advisor in political campaigns of Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey and Sen. Henry Jackson. He served on presidentially-appointed boards and task forces under Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. In 1992, then-House Speaker Thomas Foley appointed him to the Commission on Broadcasting to the People's Republic of China. Wattenberg is the author or co author of eight books dealing public opinion, politics and social demographics.

APPENDICES

1. Election Night 1980 and the Subsequent Congressional Hearings
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APPENDIX 1

Election Night 1980 and the Subsequent Congressional Hearings

The use of exit polls and early projections in then 1980 Presidential election was extremely controversial. Unexpectedly, what had been viewed as a close race for president became an early landslide victory for Ronald Reagan. Exit poll data revealed early in the day that Reagan would win the election.

At 8:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (5:15 p.m. Pacific Standard Time) on election night, NBC became the first network to project enough electoral votes to declare Republican Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan the winner. Exit poll data and the votes from states in the East led the networks to make this projection. At about 10 p.m. EST (7 p.m. PST), President Jimmy Carter conceded the election.

As a result of the media's projections and Carter's concession speech, accusations of decreased turnout by West Coast voters and an adverse effect on close elections in Western states were leveled at the network media. According to these criticisms, the network media's early projections:

1. lowered the national voter turnout;
2. expanded the popular vote margin for the Republican presidential candidate; and
3. hurt Democratic candidates in national, state and city elections in Western states who were dependent upon turnout from Democratic voters. Specifically, two incumbent Democratic House members from Western states, Rep. James Corman (Ca.) and Rep. Al Ullman (Ore.), blamed their defeats on the early network projections and the early concession by President Carter.

In 1984, the network media used exit poll data to project the winners of primaries and caucuses around the country. For example, in the Iowa caucuses, two out of the three networks had informed Iowa citizens of the winner before a single vote had been cast.

Congressional outrage at the network media's use of early projections and exit polls resulted in the passage of a "Concurrent resolution expressing the sense of Congress with respect to the adverse impact of early projections of election results by the news media" (H.C.R. 321) in the fall of 1984.

This resolution stated that "in the 1980 and 198 general elections broadcasters made projections of election results in many States while polls were still open" and that these projections may have decreased voter participation, affected close races and undermined the belief of individuals in the importance of their votes. Congress asked broadcasters in future elections to "voluntarily refrain from characterizing or projecting results of an election before all polls for the office have closed" and news media members generally to "adopt guidelines to assure that data from exit interviews are not used to characterize or project results of an election before all polls for the office have closed."

In the fall of 1984, Congress held hearings about the media's election projections (Senate hearing on August 2, 1984 before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and House hearing on October 3, 1984 before the Subcommittee on

Telecommunications, Consumer Protection, and Finance of the Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Task Force on Elections). The House's discussion with several media executives (ABC, CBS and NBC), led by Subcommittee Chairman Timothy Wirth (Colo.), laid out both sides of the issue.

Rep. Wirth stated his concern as follows: "Lest you think that somehow we are here trying to beat up on networks, let me point out why this is of concern. You all seem to think that the only issue of importance is the Presidential race. The evidence is overwhelming from our perspective, at least my own, that there is a responsibility that when you report early, people do not vote." Wirth then pointed to some of the California races allegedly impacted by the early concession and early projections of 1980: supervisors and school boards in city elections and propositions and initiatives on the state level. The problem, in Wirth's words, comes about when the networks involve themselves in the election process by "intervening very dramatically, dangerously, and improperly, in the process of American elections."

During the hearing, various congressmen expressed concern as to whether the network media recognized the existence of a problem. "Both Houses of the U.S. Congress, the chairmen of both political parties in this country, innumerable organizations across the country, the best evidence that we have from every public opinion poll, have all asked [the networks] to exercise restraint in terms of characterizations and projections and to do so until the polls are closed. Both major candidates for the Presidency of the United States, President Reagan, Vice President Mondale, have indicated that they will not, either of them, say anything about the election until the polls are closed," stated Rep. Wirth.

Several congressmen asserted that there was need for the networks to provide the public with a clearer understanding of terms such as "characterization" and "projection." Much time was spent discussing the individual network policies on the use of projections and exit poll data. Each network had a similar policy about using projections: as phrased by NBC, "a great majority of the polls must be closed in a State" before projections will be made.

Robert Chandler, Senior Vice President for administration at CBS and a former director of CBS News' election unit, conceded during the hearing that the networks may not make the distinction between characterization and projection "well enough," but he defended the accuracy of projections: "Our projections - and we have done something like a thousand since we introduced projections - have been viewed by the public with a great deal of certitude. Somebody said they are so accurate they have come to be accepted as some indication of what has happened."

Chandler also summarized the breakdown of electoral votes: "[W]e find that those States which close all of their polls by 8 p.m. eastern time account for a total of 275 electoral votes. If we add the four States which close the vast majority of their polls at 8, that total comes to 334 electoral votes. If we look at the States which close their polls at 9 p.m. eastern time, the total reaches 442 electoral votes."

Lawrence Grossman, President of NBC News, summed up the problem: "Once 270 electoral votes are totaled up, a presidential election is over, no matter how many state polls are still open for business. There is nothing we in the media can or should do about that fact. The fault lies not with the messenger who brings speedy election news. The fault (if fault there be) lies with the electoral college system, which provides for 51

separate presidential elections rather than one national election." George Watson, Vice President of News for ABC, agree with this analysis.

A landslide election, like the one in 1980, provided another problem in the projections controversy, according to Chandler: "While it is certainly true that in a close election, any one State can determine the outcome, it is equally true that in a landslide election, returns from the earlier closing States can and do determine the outcome of the Presidential race before all the polls have closed in the Western States and beyond. That is true irrespective of what the networks do or do not do. It is simply a geographical fact."

After the hearings and the 1984 Presidential election, Congressmen Al Swift and William Thomas sent letters to the three networks requesting that the networks not "use exit poll data to suggest, through interpretation of that data, the probable winner in any state until polls in that state have closed." The letter stated that this compliance was necessary in order for Congress to "seriously entertain legislation offering a uniform poll closing time or modified voting day or similar solution...."

Each of the networks responded with a letter of its own setting forth its policy of not projecting any state's votes until a substantial majority of votes in that state had been cast. Each, as well, supported the concept of a uniform poll closing law.

In 1985, the House considered and passed a uniform poll closing bill (H.R. 3525). This bill required that "each polling place in the continental United States shall close, with respect to a Presidential general election, at 9:00 o'clock [p.m.] eastern standard time" and that daylight savings time in the Pacific time zone be extended during presidential election years. The bill was referred to the Senate Rules Committee, but no further action was taken.

Further congressional activity ensued in both 1988 and 1989. The House passed H.R. 435 (1988) and H.R. 18 (1989) and referred the bills to the Senate where no action was taken. In the Senate, S. 182 (1988) and S. 136 (1989) were proposed but never passed.

In December 15, 2000, Rep. Edward Markey (Mass.) introduced a bipartisan Uniform Poll Closing Act (H.R. 5678). This bill requires polls in all 50 states to close at 9 p.m. eastern standard time (8 p.m. central standard time, 7 p.m. mountain time) during Presidential elections. In order to set a 7 p.m. Pacific time zone closing, daylight savings time would be extended for two weeks during Presidential election years, allowing for a West Coast poll closing of 7 p.m. Pacific daylight time.

APPENDIX 2

Early TV Calls In 1984: How Western Voters Deplored But Ignored Them

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Prepared for presentation at the annual conference of the
American Association for Public Opinion Research; May 1985

ABSTRACT

On election day, November 6, 1984, between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m. PST, 638 non-voting registered voters were surveyed. These telephone interviews were conducted with people in northwest Oregon who were verified as registered to vote but who had not voted (according to official poll books). Early TV verdicts of Reagan's victory did not depress turnout anywhere near the extent critics had predicted: only 2.6 percent of the non-voters blamed TV for their failure to vote – roughly less than one-quarter of one percent of the entire electorate. Most non-voters had not heard the TV projections. Political preferences of the tiny handful of TV-discouraged voters resembled the electorate at large – further minimizing the chances of early projections transforming the electorate enough to change election outcomes.

The same conclusion was reached in eastern Oregon where a natural experiment allowed contrasting turnout and time of voting in Malheur County (MST) with that in Grant County (PST). The counties were demographically similar, but Grant received an extra hour of projection news before the polls closed at 8:00 p.m. However, turnout after 5:00 PST was actually higher in Pacific-Time Grant County than it was in Mountain-Time Malheur County.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Despite the intensity of the debate, the hearings on Capitol Hill, and the interest of scholars of political communication – research on the subject had been problematic. One detailed review of the field by Percy Tannenbaum and Leslie Kostrich (1983) had concluded:

The labels of absent, inconclusive, and inconsistent provide fitting descriptions for the evidence from the collective research data and analysis on the projection issue... Too much is indirect and obliquely related to the issue at hand, not robust enough or reliable enough, and not internally consistent...

Given the relative crudeness and insensitivity of the overall methodology employed, it is perhaps no surprise that most of the reported studies were not quite up to the task.

These studies had three chief shortcomings:

- (1) Poor Timing. Most studies were conducted months after election day and were unable to escape the many problems due to that delay.
- (2) Shortage of Key respondents. Most studies have also had very small samples of the critical group – registered voters who did not vote. For example, Mendelsohn (1965) had 15 such individuals; Tuchman and Coffin (1971) had 94; and a Field Institute study (1981) had 71.
- (3) Neglect of Congressional consequences. As Tannenbaum and Kostrich pointed out, there was “virtually no direct evidence at all” about the effects on Congressional and other local elections (“the most potentially damaging aspect of the projections”).

The Oregon study was designed to remedy all three defects: it was conducted entirely on election day, targeted registered voters who did not vote, and focused on the implications for a close Congressional race.

APPENDIX 3

Explanation of Calls in Nine Races

To: Tom Hannon - CNN
From: Joe Lenski
Date: 12 December 2000
RE: Explanation of Calls in nine races

I have reviewed the Decision Screens from the nine presidential races that you sent me earlier today. I can categorically say that in retrospect there is NOT ONE SINGLE RACE that we should have called earlier or that we would have called earlier if given another chance.

The nine states break down into three groups.

First, we called Louisiana at poll closing (9:00) based upon the exit poll showing Bush leading by 6.2 to 8.2 points. Bush ended up winning by 7.7 points. VNS called the race at 9:21.

The second group contains five states that had stupendously bad exit poll estimates. Here is a comparison of the final best survey estimate at poll closing with the final actual results for these five states:

	Exit Poll	Final Result
Alabama	Gore by 1.2	Bush by 14.9
Arizona	Gore by 3.6	Bush by 6.3
Colorado	Gore by 3.1	Bush by 8.4
Georgia	Bush by 4.7	Bush by 11.7
North Carolina	Gore by 3.0	Bush by 12.8

As you can see the exit polls in these five states were off by between 7 and 16(!!!) points. We waited for actual results in each of these five states and called them as soon as we were sure that Bush would win. In North Carolina our call was 28 minutes after poll closing; in Georgia it was 32 minutes after poll closing.

In Alabama VNS made in our view a very reckless poll closing call for Bush while Gore was actually leading in the best survey estimate at that time. We believe that this is the first time that a projection was made using an exit poll that actually showed the *other candidate ahead*. We could not allow this call to go on the air until we had seen some actual returns. At 8:25 – 25 minutes after poll closing – Bush had achieved a lead and we called the race for CBS & CNN.

In Arizona there were no actual vote returns reported until about 2 hours after poll closing. By 11:40 Bush had estimated leads of 4.6 points in CORE and 2.8 points in the Integrated Model. We called Arizona for Bush at 11:46 and VNS followed shortly thereafter at 11:51.

In Colorado, Gore retained leads in all estimators except CORE until 10:40. Finally at 11:10 Bush achieved leads in all estimators and we called Colorado for Bush at 11:12 and VNS followed at 11:40.

The third group of states had marginal leads for Bush in the exit poll, but we waited for more data until we made a call. By the way, this is exactly the strategy we were following in Florida when we waited until 50 minutes after majority poll closing before calling Florida for Gore.

In Virginia the exit poll showed Bush leading by 7.6 points which produced a leading status but not a call status. Virginia is a quick counting state and by 7:25 we had a call status for Bush and called Bush for CBS & CNN at 7:25. VNS followed at 7:32.

In Arkansas the exit poll showed Bush leading by 3.6 points. As the data came in both Bush and Gore lead in some estimators until 11:40:

Time	Range of estimates
9:10	Gore +6.5 – Bush +5.3
9:40	Gore +2.4 – Bush +5.4
10:10	Gore +0.4 – Bush +6.0
10:40	Gore +1.3 – Bush + 6.8
11:10	Bush +1.4 – Bush + 7.5
11:40	Gore +0.1 – Bush +7.5

In fact at 11:40 the Best Estimator (Integrated Model) showed Gore up by a tenth of a point. Finally by midnight Bush began to lead comfortably in all estimators. We called Arkansas for Bush at 12:04 and VNS followed at 12:11.

In West Virginia the exit poll showed Bush leading by 8.7 points. FOX was the only network to project Bush the winner at poll closing. We believed that was a reckless call. We thought there was a distinct possibility that FOX may have made a mistake here and in fact as late as 9:10 Gore lead the Best VPA estimate by 8.5 points.

At 10:10 Bush led in all estimates by between 1.7 and 9.1 points and we called the race for CBS & CNN at 10:10. VNS followed at 10:46.

It is my view that the CBS/CNN Decision Team did the best job it could making projections based upon the sometimes questionable data with which we were presented. According to the spreadsheet provided by VNS last week, the VNS exit poll estimates showed the wrong presidential winner in 8 (!) states. I believe that this is a record number.

I believe that this review of the Decision Screens demonstrates that the CBS/CNN Decision Team made responsible but quick calls in each of these nine states. If you have any further questions about these projections or any other aspect of Election Night please give me a call. I will be in the office every day until Christmas.

APPENDIX 4

Representative Tauzin's Charge of Bias and CNN/CBS Decision Team Response

The question of bias was raised shortly after the election by Representative Billy Tauzin (Rep., La.) in his role as chairman of the House telecommunications subcommittee. Tauzin said the subcommittee's "analysis of the networks' election night 'victory calls' indicates an incontrovertible bias in the results which were reported." The networks "consistently reported Vice President Gore's victories earlier than Governor Bush's victories, portraying a skewed electoral picture and disenfranchising many American voters," he said. Congressional hearings are planned on this issue.

Warren Mitofsky and Joe Lenski, heads of the CNN/CBS Decision Team, told us in our January 26 interview with them that in VNS's use of exit polls on Election Day 2000, the exit polls overstated the Gore vote in 22 states and overstated the Bush vote in 9 states. In the other 19 states, the polls matched actual results. There was a similar Democratic candidate overstatement in 1996 and a larger one in 1992. This indicates that exit poll models tend to be "slightly" biased in the Democratic direction, but not in a consistent way since in some states the Republican vote is overstated, they said. ("Bias" in this context refers to unintentionally built-in distortions in such things as statistical modeling and voter sampling methods, not to bias in the sense of personal or institutional leanings toward one party or the other.)

Following is a memo prepared by Mitofsky and Lenski on the bias question.

Summary of CBS/CNN Presidential Calls in close races on November 7, 2000

Gore Calls			Minutes after	Final	Exit Poll
<u>State</u>	<u>Time of Call</u>	<u>Poll Close</u>	<u>Poll Closing</u>	<u>Margin</u>	<u>Bias*</u>
Michigan	8:00	8:00	0 minutes	4.6%	NA
Washington	11:06	11:00	6 minutes	5.2%	NA
Maine	8:33	8:00	33 minutes	4.9%	2.9%B
Pennsylvania	8:47	8:00	47 minutes	5.2%	0.1%Even
Florida+	7:50	7:00	50 minutes	0.0%	0.3%B
Minnesota	9:36	8:00	96 minutes	2.4%	2.5%G
Iowa+	2:04 AM	10:00	244 minutes	0.3%	3.0%G

Bush Calls			Minutes after	Final	Exit Poll
<u>State</u>	<u>Time of Call</u>	<u>Poll Close</u>	<u>Poll Closing</u>	<u>Margin</u>	<u>Bias**</u>
Louisiana	9:00	9:00	0 minutes	7.7%	0.6%G
Alabama *	8:25	8:00	25 minutes	14.5%	NA
Virginia	7:25	7:00	25 minutes	7.7%	3.4%B
Georgia *	7:32	7:00	32 minutes	11.4%	9.4%B
Tennessee	9:16	8:00	76 minutes	3.8%	1.7%G
Nevada+	11:20	10:00	80 minutes	3.5%	4.9%B

Ohio	9:14	7:30	104 minutes	3.8%	1.7%B
Missouri	10:05	8:00	125 minutes	3.3%	3.8%B
Colorado+	11:12	9:00	132 minutes	8.3%	6.1%B
West Virginia	10:10	7:30	160 minutes	6.3%	4.5%G
Arizona+	11:46	9:00	166 minutes	6.2%	NA
NH+	10:04	7:00	184 minutes	1.5%	3.9%B
Arkansas	12:04 AM	8:30	214 minutes	5.5%	6.2%B

* VNS called Alabama at poll closing and we withheld the call for 25 minutes. We had questions about the exit poll data we were looking at in Alabama and we waited until the real vote had been counted in a few precincts to confirm the exit poll estimate. Also Georgia was not called until 32 minutes after poll closing because we had similar concerns about the exit poll data there.

** Exit Poll Bias: Figure indicates amount by which margin in the exit poll understates Bush or Gore.

+ Exit Poll had the wrong candidate ahead

CONCLUSIONS

We see no statistical evidence of any bias in calling states for Gore faster than we called states for Bush.

The states that were called for Gore within an hour of poll closing (Michigan, Washington, Maine & Pennsylvania) all ended up with final winning margins for Gore of about 5 points or more – with the exception of Florida which is its own special case. We have not re-evaluated the Decision Screens that we examined at the times of the calls, but we are sure that in each case - including Florida - the estimated margin of victory in the states called for Gore within an hour of poll closing was 5 points or more.

The calls for Bush in Tennessee, Nevada, Ohio & Missouri all occurred between 1 hour and 2 hours after poll closing. The final Bush victory margins in all four of these states were between 3 and 4 points. These Bush margins were one to two points smaller than the Gore margins in Michigan, Washington, Maine and Pennsylvania and that is why we took an extra 30 to 60 minutes before calling these states.

The Bush victories in Colorado, West Virginia, Arizona, and Arkansas were in the 5-8 point range but took longer to call for several reasons: First, these states are notoriously slow in counting their votes. Second, we had witnessed that the exit poll estimates in several states – most specifically Kentucky – had overstated the support for Bush. Third, West Virginia is a historically Democratic state – it even voted for Carter in 1980 and Dukakis in 1988 – and we were looking for more vote data to confirm that it was bucking the historical trend and voting Republican. Fourth, Colorado and Arizona have large numbers of absentee voters which ended up supporting Bush by a large margin; this meant that the exit polling of those who voted on Election Day underestimated the final margin of victory for Bush. There were the reasons why we were more cautious in these three states.

There has been a suggestion that exit polls overstate the vote for Democratic candidates. That statement is not complete. Democrats were overstated more often than Republicans, but which party is overstated varies from state to state. The various reports refer to all this error as bias. That is an inaccurate description. Some of the overstatement

is systematic, and is a bias, and some is random error due to sampling voters within polling places. The data we used for this analysis was not the final data from VNS. It is what we had available. The data is in the last column of the table. This is what we found:

Among the states won by Gore, the exit poll understated Bush in 2 states and Gore in 2. 1 had no bias and we had no information about the bias in 2 others.

Among the states won by Bush, the exit poll understated Bush in 8 states and Gore in 3. We had no information about the bias in 2 states.

APPENDIX 5

Recommendations for Improving Criteria for Election Projections

CNN Decision Team

Warren Mitofsky & Joe Lenski

January 25, 2001

The VNS decision models have performed well over the years, and our decision-making in projecting election winners based upon these models has had an amazing record for both accuracy and timeliness. However, the 2000 Election has taught all of us many lessons about the reliability and potential fallibility of the vote data and computations that we have relied upon for decades. A combination of factors contributed to the tarnishing of our record of accurate projections, and as a result the current criteria for election projections need to be reevaluated.

In this document we propose several changes to our rules for decision-making that will improve our chances of avoiding similar mistakes in future elections. Our recommendations deal with several specific areas where the models seem to be underestimating the full potential for error. Over the past three elections we have observed large exit poll errors in several states. We have seen an increasing number of absentee and early voting. We have also observed critical errors in election night vote counting by local election officials.

We believe that the following recommendations will deal with each of these issues:

1. In order to project the winner in an election based solely upon exit poll data, the standard for an estimated vote margin will be increased from 2.6 standard errors to four standard errors – i.e. a Critical Value of 4.0 instead of 2.6 will be necessary for a “Call Status” based entirely on exit poll data.
2. No projection of a winner after poll-closing will be made until there is a “Call Status” based upon only actual vote data.
3. No projection of a winner will be made in any race on election night where the estimated margin of victory is less than one percent even when 100% of precincts are reporting.
4. In every state with a significant portion of the voting conducted through early voting or absentee ballot (greater than 10% of the total vote), all estimates will be computed to include a calculation of the absentee vote using past absentee vote history and telephone surveys of absentee voters wherever possible. A winner will only be projected when the result of this calculation is a “Call Status”.

By following these criteria we would have avoided every single one of the wrong calls and near misses of the past several elections.

Applying a more stringent standard to exit poll projections at poll closing will eliminate the chance for mistaken calls such as happened in the 1996 New Hampshire Senate race and the 1996 Arizona Republican Primary.

By waiting until there is a “Call Status” in the estimates based upon actual vote data, we will avoid mistakes like the original call for Gore in Florida. We had felt comfortable with that projection because we observed a “Leading Status” in the Best VPA estimate – in other words, the best estimate based solely upon actual vote data in the sample precincts. If we had waited for a “Call Status” in this estimator, the projection of Gore as the winner in Florida would never have been made.

Our biggest lesson from Election 2000 is that we cannot always rely on the vote counts that are being reported by election officials. If we can't rely on these vote counts, we should not be using this data to call the outcome of close races. By applying a minimum margin of one percent before reporting a winner in any race, we will be protecting ourselves from bad calls resulting from vote processing errors such as those we observed in Volusia County, Florida, Bernalillo County, New Mexico and other election jurisdictions in 2000.

The CNN/CBS Decision Desk has a record of projecting winners in most races faster than the other networks in every election since 1996. While these new standards will prevent the wrong winner being projected on air, they will also delay the projection of winners in many races.

We have reviewed the decision screens for 23 presidential races in 2000. Applying these new standards would have delayed our projection of the winner in many of these states:

State	Time of Projection	
	Actual	Estimated using new criteria
Florida	7:50 G/ 2:17 B	No call on election night
Georgia	7:32	7:32 – no change
New Hampshire	10:05	10:05 – no change
Virginia	7:25	7:25 – no change
North Carolina	7:58	7:58 – no change
Ohio	9:16	10:10
West Virginia	10:11	10:40
Alabama	8:30	8:30 – no change
Maine	8:35	8:35 – no change
Michigan	8:00	8:40
Missouri	10:05	10:40
Pennsylvania	8:47	9:40
Tennessee	9:16	10:10
Arkansas	12:05 AM	1:10 AM
Arizona	11:46	12:40 AM
Colorado	11:12	11:12 – no change
Louisiana	9:00	10:10
Minnesota	9:36	9:36 – no change
New Mexico	10:21	No call on election night
Wisconsin	6:22 AM	No call on election night
Iowa	2:04 AM	No call on election night
Nevada	11:20	1:10 AM
Washington	12:09 AM	12:09 AM – no change

To summarize, the implementation of these changes in the decision criteria would have prevented all errors in projecting the winning candidate in any race. In addition these criteria would have led to four states not being called at all on election night and the projection of a winner being delayed by at least 30 minutes in 10 other states.

Cable news just isn't equipped for an election whose results aren't immediately clear. Wolf Blitzer introduces CNN's election night coverage. CNN. Of the five presidential elections of the 21st century before the 2020 election, only two — 2008 and 2012 — were called before midnight on the East Coast, and the 2000 election dragged on for over a month. And yet to watch TV coverage on election night — not to mention social media reactions to said TV coverage — was to watch a full-blown meltdown over the fact that nobody really knew anything yet, something that continued to play out across Wednesday and Thursday as all involved waited for official vote counts. CNN and other television networks, while acting within their legal and journalistic rights, failed their journalistic mission and reported the 2000 presidential election in a way that improperly interfered with the election process. In calling winners of individual states based on exit polling and votes from sample precincts, accuracy and completeness of information were sacrificed to the pressures of competition. All would no doubt say that they follow such a policy now, but their actual performance on Election Night 2000 makes such an assurance hollow. All our recommendations are aimed at correcting that situation, so that CNN and others can fulfill their obligations not to impinge improperly on the election process and to provide viewers with election information that is as accurate as it is timely. Television's Performance on Election Night 2000 A Report for CNN. Article. Joan Konner. Last year's election night blunders by the networks highlight the extent to which the news media — and particularly television — have become major actors in presidential elections. This article employs a content analysis to examine how thorough, balanced, and substantive network news was in Campaign 2000 as compared with 1996, 1992, and 1988. Although the principal focus is on the broadcast networks, data on other news genres, as well as candidate discourse, are brought to bear on the research questions. The 2000 United States presidential election was the 54th quadrennial presidential election, held on Tuesday, November 7, 2000. Republican candidate George W. Bush, the governor of Texas and eldest son of the 41st president, George H. W. Bush, won the disputed election, defeating Democratic nominee Al Gore, the incumbent vice president. It was the fourth of five American presidential elections, and the first in 112 years, in which the winning candidate lost the popular vote, and is considered one of...