

To the Editor Easy As 1-2-3

Paul Jerome Croce insightfully notes that, since it would be nice if counting really were as simple as direct objectivity, wishful thinking helps us to ignore complexities [see “Perspective” in the March/April issue].

About half a century ago, W. Edwards Deming, then a statistical consultant to the Bureau of the Census, proposed that the enumeration procedure of the Census be abandoned, because it was practically impossible to do it accurately. Instead, more accurate results could be obtained by using carefully designed area-probability samples within each congressional district.

The term “statistics” has two meanings. The one popularly understood is numerical information about collections of things, people, or events, generally assembled by some form of counting. The other is a branch of mathematics, based on probability theory used for analysis and estimation. Many assume that large-scale counting is easy. If that assumption were correct, a census based on complete enumeration would be 100% accurate. Statistical estimation, on the other hand, can be entirely accurate—i.e., free of bias—if properly done, but it will be potentially imprecise, subject to a degree of random error that can be assessed in probability terms.

What Deming proposed, in effect, was to recognize that attempts at complete enumeration were bound to be unsuccessful, and that the error would be in the form of bias; and that it would be preferable to have bias-free data with some small probability of imprecision. He wanted to trade one definition of statistics for the other. Bias inevitably discriminates against some; imprecision does not.

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“De-Spinning” the Gore Campaign

By Sheldon Appleton

Even before Al Gore’s concession speech, political and media “spinners” had announced their verdicts on the 2000 presidential race. Before some of these “spins” congeal into conventional wisdom, perhaps they should be reconsidered in the light of evidence provided by surveys taken during the campaign and the election returns themselves.

Spin #1: With peace and prosperity and high presidential approval scores, an incumbent vice president like Gore should have won in a landslide.

The vice presidency has not proven an ideal base for launching a presidential candidacy. According to Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky in *Presidential Elections*,

...it is the incumbent vice president who is seeking to succeed an incumbent president of the same party who suffers most, as Nixon discovered in 1960 and Humphrey in 1968 and Albert Gore may discover in 2000.... A vice president may find it difficult to defend a record he or she did not make and may not wholly care for.... This is the most difficult strategic problem of all for candidates.

As early as the fall of 1998 Everett Ladd warned that Bill Clinton’s approval ratings could be misleading, noting that he was rated lower on integrity than Richard Nixon near the end of the Watergate scandal. Last year, David Moore of the Gallup Organization reported that by mid-2000 the public seemed to have forgotten how badly it had felt about the 1992 economy. In 1992, only 12% had characterized the economy as excellent or good, but in

2000, 52% recalled it as having been excellent or good.

Gore’s prospects were further dimmed by two more unexpected developments. The candidacy of Pat Buchanan—once viewed as a serious threat to George W. Bush—foundered with the implosion of the Reform Party. At the same time, Ralph Nader’s candidacy grew to the point where it drained votes and resources from Gore.

Spin #2: Gore ran a terrible campaign.

Certainly in an election as close as this, *any* misstep can be singled out as responsible for the outcome. Gore clearly made many missteps, from his changing images to his exaggerations and his erratic debate performances. But Bush’s performance was hardly flawless.

Gore’s critics seem to have lost sight of the fact that the vice president *gained* rather than lost ground over the course of the campaign, even though the Republicans had somewhat greater financial resources. From early 1999 until the Democratic convention, the Gallup poll showed Bush leading Gore by margins as high as 17 points. Just before the Republican convention, that lead stood at 11%, and more than two-thirds of likely voters expected a Bush victory.

A series of Pew Research Center surveys found that between July and election weekend, Gore gained 4 percentage points in Democratic-leaning states, 6 points in Republican-leaning states, and 5 points in “battleground” states. As frequently reported, unions and black groups did an outstanding job in promoting turnout among overwhelmingly Democratic voters. But a post-election Pew survey shows that

Republicans did at least as well. In “battleground” states, 30% said they had been urged to vote by the Gore campaign, 34% by the Bush campaign.

At the start of the campaign, Florida—with Jeb Bush as governor and Republican majorities in both houses of the legislature—was thought to be safely in the Republican column. Yet Gore ended up in a virtual tie in Florida, despite the infamous butterfly ballot, and with a half million-plus popular vote majority. The “preponderance of evidence” does not support the claim that Gore’s loss was primarily due to the shortcomings of his campaign.

Spin #3: Gore didn’t identify himself closely enough with Clinton or ask for his help early enough. (Clinton himself is reported to have told this to Gore in a post-election confrontation after a year during which the two had barely spoken to each other.) Had Clinton been eligible to run, he would have won hands down.

No surveys can tell us what would have happened in a campaign that wasn’t run. But consider these findings:

- In March 1999, when Gallup reported Clinton’s approval rating in the mid-60s, a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics survey asked registered voters how they would vote if the 1992 election were held over again that day. The result was a 58% to 37% landslide in favor of the senior Bush.
- A July 2000 Gallup poll reported that 38% of likely voters said Gore’s ties to Clinton made them view him less favorably; only 13% said those ties made them feel more favorably toward Gore.
- Gore’s biggest bounce came during the Democratic convention when he named Senator Joseph Lieberman—known for his criticism of Clinton’s moral failings—as his running mate, kissed his wife with gusto, declared

himself to be “his own man,” and promised he would “never let you down.”

- The 2000 Voter News Service exit poll showed 24% of voters saying “the Clinton administration scandals” were very important to their votes and another 20% saying they were somewhat important. These groups voted 80% and 70%, respectively, for Bush. Nearly twice as many exit poll respondents (18%) claimed to have voted to express opposition to Clinton as to express support for him (10%).
- In New York, the one state where Gore and a Clinton were on the ballot, both won handily, but the vice president’s margin of victory was more than double Hillary Clinton’s margin over Congressman Rick Lazio. The First Lady’s campaign signs and paraphernalia referred to her as “Hillary”—not “Clinton” or “Hillary Clinton.”
- In a January 2001 Gallup survey that showed 65% of Americans approving of Clinton’s job performance, a majority (51%) of the same sample said—before the pardons controversy—they were glad he was leaving the White House.

These data suggest that Gore was right to think he had more to lose than to gain by associating himself more closely with Clinton. Indeed, both campaigns seem to have agreed on this point. Candidate Bush’s omnipresent mantra was that he would “restore honor and integrity to the Oval Office.” His campaign constantly referred to the “Clinton-Gore” administration. This has not been the custom of candidates who believe the incumbent president to be more popular than his vice presidential heir. John Kennedy did not run against the “Eisenhower-Nixon” administration in 1960, nor did Michael Dukakis rail against the “Reagan-Bush” administration in 1988.

Spin #4: Gore was a sore loser because he failed to follow the example of Richard

Nixon in 1960. Nixon graciously declined to ask for a recount in Illinois, though there was good reason to suspect that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley (father of Gore’s campaign chairman) had “created” enough votes there to throw the state to Kennedy.

In 2000 Gore led in the popular vote; in 1960 Nixon trailed. Kennedy led in Illinois by 8,858 votes rather than the hundreds which separated Bush and Gore in Florida. Because Kennedy also held a 303 to 219 electoral vote majority, even a reversal of the Illinois outcome would not have made Nixon the winner unless the vote in another large state were also overturned. The best prospect would have been Texas, home state of Kennedy running mate Lyndon Johnson, which reported a plurality of more than 46,000 votes for Kennedy. But Nixon had won some states by slim majorities as well, which Kennedy might have challenged. And a disputed election would have gone to a House of Representatives (and Senate) in which Democrats held huge majorities.

We can hope that the National Election Study and more detailed analyses of the VNS exit poll and other surveys will throw more light on what happened in the 2000 presidential campaign. Until then, we might do well to consider the evidence already at hand before leaping to premature conclusions. ●

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