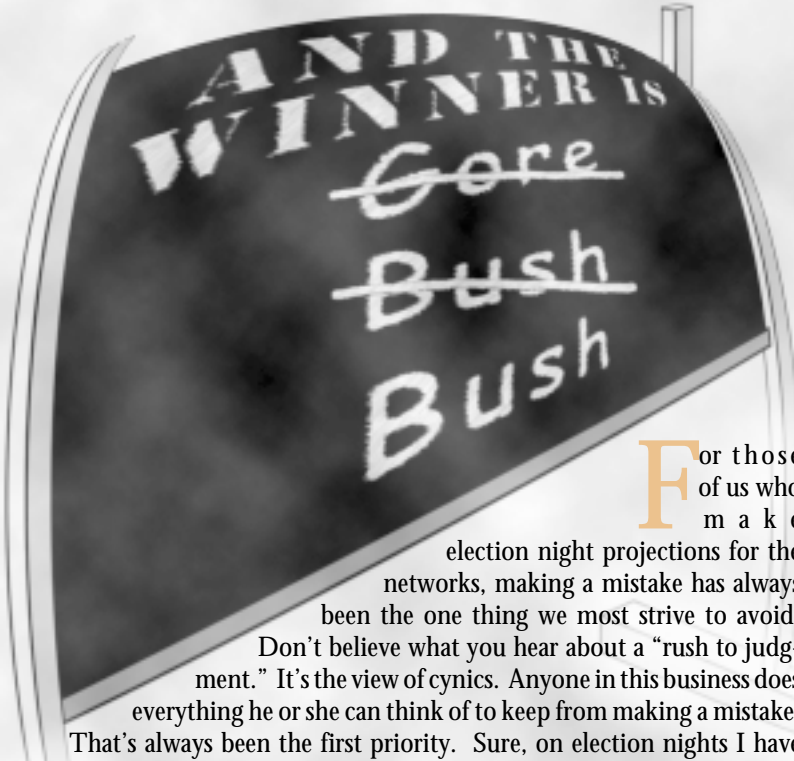


From the Field Fool Me Twice

An election nightmare

By Warren J. Mitofsky



For those of us who make election night projections for the networks, making a mistake has always been the one thing we most strive to avoid. Don't believe what you hear about a "rush to judgment." It's the view of cynics. Anyone in this business does everything he or she can think of to keep from making a mistake. That's always been the first priority. Sure, on election nights I have heard from executives at CNN, where I consult, and CBS, where I worked for 27 years and now also consult, that they want to get on the air first with a projection. But I never heard one of them willing to gamble on being right.

When I first started in this business in 1967 I asked Bill Leonard, who was the vice president in charge of CBS's election coverage, how he would divide \$100 between the competing priorities of being first and being right. "I want \$100 on each," he said. He did not mean 50-50. He wanted certainty for both. That was a year before the 1968 election. The weekend before that election he called me into his office and said, "I don't care how long it takes, I want to be right."

A nagging concern of mine for many years was that I would make a mistake twice in one night in the same state. That recurring nightmare, however, was not nearly as bad as what actually happened in Florida on the night of last year's presidential election. Florida was the key to the outcome of the presidential election. Two bad projections, first for Albert Gore early in the night and then for George W. Bush when almost all the precincts in the state had reported, stained the solid journalism practiced by the television networks in the reporting of elections for

the last 38 years. It also damaged survey research.

I made those bad projections for CBS and CNN, along with my partner Joe Lenski. We were not alone. The other networks made the same mistakes. During my 33 years there had not been a blunder this bad at any network. The Florida errors last year will stand with other media election fiascos: the *Chicago Tribune's* award of the 1948 election to Dewey over Truman, that year's bad pre-election polls by Gallup, Roper and Crossley, and the *Literary Digest's* forecast in 1936 that Landon would defeat Roosevelt. The repercussions from Florida will be felt at least until the next presidential election, and remembered for much longer.

The Florida errors caused the networks to be charged with "recklessly endangering the electoral process" by making projections before all polls closed and "rushing to judgment, ... [in] a foolish attempt to beat their rivals." Republican Congressman Billy Tauzin of Louisiana charged that there was a "statistical bias [in the models] in favor of Democrats... and against Republicans." While nothing said here can erase the egregious error of prematurely calling Bush the winner, a number of the charges are based more on the prior beliefs of the accuser and less on an honest review of the evidence.

Since the election each network has issued a statement about its assessment of the problems and what it is likely to do in future election coverage. The Research Triangle Institute, a prominent survey research company, has re-

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viewed the exit-polling methods used by Voter News Service (VNS), and Congressman Tauzin has held a nationally televised congressional hearing. There have been critical stories in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Brill's Content*, *American Journalism Review* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*. The academic treatises are still to come. Some of the criticism, in my judgment, is useful and will no doubt be used to make VNS better. Other comments are based on mistaken ideas.

A little historical background may be useful before getting into the details of the Florida calls. Starting in 1962, CBS News sampled precincts within states in order to make estimates of the outcome of elections. By 1964 NBC and ABC were doing it, too. These non-probability samples used the vote count released by election officials to make rather crude estimates, by today's standards. There were no exit polls. Even so, Lyndon Johnson's victory was announced a little after 9 o'clock, Eastern time.

Exit polls were introduced later in the '60s and were used mostly for analysis. NBC dominated election night news coverage in 1980 by using exit polls for half the state projections that went into the early evening announcement of Ronald Reagan's victory over then-President Jimmy Carter. For the rest of the 1980s, exit poll projections were attempted in all states by ABC, CBS and NBC.

1990 saw the start of a network pool—now called VNS—for exit polling and projections. Major newspapers and local television became subscribers. The pool made it possible to continue covering every state. Critics preferred competing exit polls at each network. What they failed to consider is that exit polling, and the resulting analysis, would not have continued in all states because of the enormous expense involved. The

networks would likely have cut back exit polling to only the 15 to 20 states with hot races. States with easy projec-

crat, Bill Nelson, won the Senate contest. There was no projection for President. A call of this race based on just

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tions would have gotten marginal coverage. By creating VNS, the networks traded a reduction of the escalating election night costs throughout the 1980s for coverage for all states by a pool. Today, VNS includes five networks and the Associated Press and is closely managed by representatives of each of the members.

In the 1960s and '70s there were mistaken state projections almost every election, but not many, and none had serious consequences. Most of the time the network that made an error corrected it promptly. There were even fewer errors by any network in the '80s. During the entire decade of the '90s there was only one mistaken winner announced by VNS—in the New Hampshire Senate race in 1996. This hardly reflects a statistical process that was out of control, as some of the critics have charged, or a rush to judgement. It reflects a statistical process that worked and worked well.

During all those years the network election night broadcasts relied on these projections and the analytical material from the exit polls to tell the world about the shifts in government in our country. They not only told who won, but which constituencies supported each candidate and what issues played an important role in their votes.

In Florida this year at 7 o'clock, when 95% of the polls closed, there was a projection that the Demo-

crat, Bill Nelson, won the Senate contest. There was no projection for President. A call of this race based on just

the exit poll looked too risky, so we waited for real vote returns in the sample precincts. The real votes confirmed the Gore lead, and Gore was called the winner 50 minutes after poll closing time.

There was no rush to this conclusion. Before we made the call we also wanted to check the exit poll against real vote returns to see if there was any possible overstatement in the exit poll for one of the candidates. The model produces a variety of estimates, each with different statistical assumptions. They all showed Gore ahead by margins of 5 to 10 percentage points. The best estimator said that Gore led by 7.3 points. We also saw that the exit poll was slightly overstating actual Bush support! We saw the same Bush overstatement in Kentucky, the only other state for which we had data at that time.

The critics are right when they say the model should have done a better job of accounting for the Florida absentee vote, which made up 12% of the 2000 vote in the state. The model did not account for about 5 percentage points of the absentee vote. That oversight accounted for only about 1% of the overstatement of the Gore margin, though.

Absentee vote was not the reason the estimates were wrong. Instead, I would submit that every once in a great while a carefully designed and tested sample

yields an estimate that is wide of the mark. Of the thousands of races I have participated in this is only the second time I have seen this much solid evidence for a projection that turned out wrong. Sometimes good samples produce bad estimates.

We did not feel any pressure to call the Florida race prematurely at the CBS/CNN decision desk. The reason all the networks called this race at about the same time was not that we were playing follow-the-leader, as some critics contend, nor were we pressured. There is a simpler explanation: we all saw the same vote counts at the same time. Throughout the night we made decisions when we thought we had reliable projections, and not before.

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We held out on the fourth electoral vote in Maine for several hours in spite of requests for a resolution. We held back the VNS call for president in Alabama for 25 minutes until we felt assured that it would stand. We also held out on calling the Montana Senate race. This was the race that affirmed continued Republican control of the Senate. Over the years we never made a call because someone else did or because we were urged to do it.

While I don't want to minimize the confusion caused by the Gore call, I consider that mistake much less significant than the announcement that Bush won Florida and the presidency. The Gore call was the sort of mistake that might happen again in spite of the best efforts and improvements in future sta-

tistical model building. The Bush mistake, however, never should have happened—and it could have been prevented. With any reasonable improvements this kind of mistake can be avoided in the future.

Here is what happened: All the networks called this race starting at 2:15 AM. The projection was based on an analysis of the county vote tallies supplied by local election officials. (It was not based on exit polling or on a projection model.) VNS reporters, stationed in each county, forwarded the vote counts periodically to the VNS processing center. From there the counts were reported to the networks. Fox was the first to call Bush the winner, followed within two minutes first by NBC and then by CBS/CNN. ABC

was last. Our colleagues making decisions at VNS and the AP did not call Bush the winner. They deserve credit for their restraint. However, their organizations did play major roles in what the rest of us did.

When we all made that Bush-wins-Florida call we were looking at a vote count that had Bush leading by 51,000 votes, with 97% of the precincts counted. An analysis showed that Gore would need about 63% of the 179,000 votes still to be counted to catch Bush. The only county in which he was getting that high a percentage of the vote was Broward, where only 2% of the vote remained to be counted. We thought he would pick up votes in Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, but not enough to win. All three counties combined would only make

up about 20,000 votes. Other counties with votes to be counted were supporting Bush. Over the next 30 minutes the Bush win looked even more certain.

Still there was no projection from VNS or the AP. We wondered what they knew that we did not know. A little before 3:00 we found out. There was a 20,000-vote error overstating Bush in Volusia County, where Daytona is located. That error went into the VNS computer a few minutes after 2 AM. It was corrected in the AP computer at 2:16. It took VNS until 2:48 to make its correction. It was after 3:00 before we noticed the Bush margin had narrowed to an unsafe level.

Neither VNS nor the AP published a message to its members or subscribers telling us they entered a 20,000-vote swing in Volusia County when they put in the errant votes. Nor did either tell anyone when they corrected the error. It was as though neither organization had any awareness of the importance of the Florida vote count to the outcome of the presidency at that moment. Had they alerted us to the entry of the first vote adjustment the network analysts might have been suitably suspicious of the vote count *before* Bush was called the winner.

During all the years I worked for CBS or headed the pool we had a message wire that alerted us to any unusual vote entry or correction. It sat right next to the decision desk. VNS had a message wire in 2000. They used it to alert users to projections and administrative matters. They did not use it for alerting anyone about big adjustments in the Florida vote tallies.

VNS, AP, and the Florida Secretary of State independently tallied the county votes. We had direct access only to the VNS tally. With a little hunting we found the other two tallies on the web,

but not until after we made the Bush projection. We were remiss. We should have been looking at these sites earlier. However, even if we had, we would have seen about the same vote counts VNS was giving us at the time we made the Bush projection. The differences in the counts did not show up until *after* the projection was made.

Another charge made by critics was that the Gore call was made before all the polls closed in Florida. That's true. We made it before the counties in the Florida panhandle closed—10 minutes before.

New Hampshire presidential primary, will WMUR in Manchester wait for a network projection sometime after 8:00 when the last polls close, or will it do its own projection at 7:00, the traditional time for projections in that state? Will the AP report that WMUR projection? They usually do report other media projections. Will the networks then report what was on the AP wire while they hold their own projection?

This year Congress will once again take up a uniform poll-closing bill. The first such proposal was in 1965. If it becomes law this time the con-

Another charge by Congressman Tauzin was that the networks had committed "inadvertent bias" in the order in which races were called. The argument he advanced was based on his belief that more exit polls overstate the Democrats' votes than the Republicans'. He thinks this made us call Gore the winner sooner than Bush.

He is wrong, or at least his logic is. If we expected an overstatement for Gore we would be *less* likely to call a race in which he was leading. Conversely, we would be *more* likely to call a race in which Bush was leading. An analysis

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Networks call races in states after the vast majority of the polls in the state close. That was part of an agreement they made with the House Election Taskforce in 1985. It's what the networks routinely did even before there was an agreement. It is the logical time for a call. When the first polls close, election officials in the precincts publicly release the vote counts and VNS, the AP and the Secretary of State start compiling and reporting state totals. When the election officials release the vote the networks start making projections.

The networks have all said that in the future they will wait for all of a state's polls to close before they make a projection. I find it difficult to believe this promise will last without other converts. Those local voting officials will still be counting and releasing votes when the first polls close. Also, it will not take local media long to discover that they have an hour headstart on the networks. On the night of the next

troverly over the potential effect of projections on west coast voters will be history.

In the 1980s uniform poll closing was advanced in the House. It was passed in three successive sessions. The Senate showed almost no interest. Not a single western state senator showed up at the first committee hearing on the subject that I attended. The last rejection of the legislation in the Senate was due to objections by the transportation industry. It objected to a provision that delayed daylight-saving time for two weeks in the west. The House added that provision in an attempt to keep the polls open an hour longer in the Pacific time zone. Under that plan, which seems to be the same one Congressman Tauzin said he would recommend, polls would close at 9:00 in the Eastern time zone, 8:00 in the Central time zone and 7:00 in the Mountain and Pacific zones. This plan would cause the fewest changes to existing poll closing times.

of the times when the races were called in 2000 showed no bias favoring either candidate. Bush won more states that were close than Gore did. That may have contributed to the perception of bias.

In the coming months the networks and the AP will likely commit to four more years of VNS with added financial resources. VNS will likely implement some of the better suggestions made by the Research Triangle Institute. I hope VNS and the networks will have the wisdom to ignore others. VNS also will develop a new computer system. Whether VNS fixes its structural problems remains to be seen.

I look forward to the election in 2002. It will mark a new beginning. It will demonstrate that VNS and the various decision desks learned from their mistakes. It will also show that the last election was a fluke. ●