

After Florida

By Bernard Roshco

For polling, Election Night 2000 was a broadband replay of Election Night 1948, which bequeathed us an unforgettable photo of President-elect Harry Truman holding up a copy of the *Chicago Tribune*. The front-page headline read, “Dewey Beats Truman.” As for 2000, the public will remember the wrong calls on Florida, the state that stalled the election. Only the professionals will recall the hair-line accuracy of most pre-election polls, despite the problem of parsing the “undecided,” Ralph Nader, and Pat Buchanan votes.

How many will remember that the network “decision desks,” not the pollsters, made the calls? How many will recall that John Ellis, who ran Fox News Channel’s decision desk and was the first to project George Bush’s Florida victory, was Bush’s first cousin? Popular memory will recall the election night projections the way William Safire summarized them in his *New York Times* op-ed column of November 9: “The harm done to the election by the early, erroneous pollsters’ [sic!] call of Florida for Al Gore, compounded eight hours later by the too-eager reversal awarding the election to George W. Bush, should not be underestimated.”

Election Night 2000 re-taught polling’s lesson of 1948: If you get the winner wrong, no matter how close you come to the right percentages, everything you get right is ignored. All the disclaimers that polls do not predict are undone on election night, when the projections made by network decision desks compete to pre-empt the news of the voters’ actual decisions.

The Florida data, unweighted for inept election officials and error-prone

voters, were undone by unmeasurable error. On election night, Dan Rather blamed the usual suspects of the misinformation age, the computers: “To err is human but to really foul up requires a computer.” The real culprit, of course, was a bit of old technology, a culprit convicted of fouling up prior elections: a “butterfly” ballot.

The butterflies took wing on Election Day, released by a perpetrator who was neither hired gun nor dirty trickster. Poor Theresa LePore, the Inspector Clouseau of the voting booth. Trying to be helpful, this unwitting bumbler designed a ballot for Palm Beach County as user-friendly as child-proof packaging.

Anybody who has struggled to write comprehensible instructions will appreciate Ms. LePore’s election afternoon memo to poll workers. As complaints were streaming in, she wrote an irrefutable argument for pre-testing: “Please remind ALL voters coming in that they are to vote only for one (1) presidential candidate and that they are to punch the hole next to the arrow next to the number next to the candidate they wish to vote for.”

When the voting booths open, exit poll tallies take over from tracking polls and continue handicapping the electoral horserace. They give the networks a running story with which to pull in viewers and hold them. In the competition for audience, whatever draws viewers will be broadcast. The Florida fiasco may produce a truce in the competition to be first with projections, especially if Congress bays loudly enough. Given the history of network jockeying for an election night edge, one could make book on how long such a truce holds.

For a few hours, exit poll data become erotica. Leaked numbers are the naughty pictures of Election Day,

something to peek at and pass around the web. Viewers get a flash of what can’t be fully revealed until the show’s final act.

Election night is an exercise in network hubris. The ancient Greeks would have predicted the gods would humble such overreachers. “Projecting” US quadrennial elections, not merely the presidential vote but Senators and Representatives, and getting it sufficiently right, is an elegant statistical achievement, as good in its way as climbing Mount Everest. Calling state elections at the earliest possible moment has become the multiple Everest of polling. Fifty peaks to scale because they are there. Like the climb, it may not be worth doing any more. The ascent is becoming an ego trip, not unlike the networks vying for firsts.

The exit polls of 2000 were supposed to be the culmination of at least 20 years of experience and testing. Instead, Voter News Service provided the data for a black comedy of errors. The networks were two-time losers, miscalling Florida for Gore in the early evening and for Bush early the following morning.

Florida election officials were exit polling’s lucky charms. The preoccupation of pundits and polls with variously attached chads and different depths of ballot dimpling offered the gift of a quiet period in which to think about the abuses and uses not only of exit polling but, also, of political polling, overall.

Projections are a vanity item, but the final exit poll data comprise an invaluable resource. Exit polls not only tell what happened; they explain why it happened. They tell not only who voted but what made them vote as they did. They generate the data for political analysis and for background stories that span campaigns.

In this time of partisan ferocity, the exit poll data offer a benchmark against which to measure the validity of partisan claims. The data can suggest how to structure compromises and provide a rallying place for those who may seek a middle ground. In terms of journalistic utility and public service, the long-term concern should be to continue producing exit poll data after future elections.

Print media might take a cue from the networks and produce unique editorial content for themselves. Why not a consortium of print media, perhaps abetted by foundation funding, to generate exit poll data for media and academic use?

While the networks face the challenge of disciplining their use of Election Day tallies, polling professionals who cover the political scene face a broader, long-term challenge. Political polling is now an integral part of politics, irrespective of elections. To the extent we have a “continuous campaign,” we have continuous polling. The expanded role of polling poses significant challenges to the quality of polling performance and will shape the public’s perception of polling’s objectivity.

The Florida fiasco ratcheted up the intense partisanship that now permeates politics. Former Secretaries of State rode into West Palm Beach as partisan gunslingers. After that, nobody got the benefit of the doubt. Judges on the Florida appellate bench were demonized on the basis of their political sponsorship, and their opinions were dismissed as inevitably biased. From judges to ballot counters, no quarter was given to anybody sucked into the conflict. Nobody was credited with integrity.

When senior judges get no credit for objectivity, how long until pollsters’ partisanship becomes a sub-

ject of political dispute? During the presidential campaign, reporters routinely identified sources as “Democratic” or “Republican” pollsters. In the context of the stories in which they were quoted, this was journalistically correct. The pollsters’ comments were always supportive of their clients. Part of their job description, obviously, was to serve as spokespeople.

Polling for a political client is almost as old as modern polling. Hadley Cantril, a Princeton professor and associate of George Gallup, was the original presidential pollster. For FDR, he gathered and interpreted data on controversial policies, such as the lend-lease program for Great Britain, prior to US entry into World War II. But Cantril didn’t go to the press as a Democratic spokesman for FDR’s program; he interpreted his data for his client. Now, bad news goes to the client, presumably, while researchers go public with the best possible spin on their data. Where does the presumptive objectivity begin and end?

Not all hired guns shoot it out publicly. Overt partisanship is a lesser threat to the integrity of political polling than covert partisanship. Releasing “studies” with questions tilted to elicit the answers desired by partisan sponsors has become a tactic for waging public-relations campaigns. Tax policy and entitlement policy are two of the most visible issues fought with poll data based on questionable questions. Of course, it doesn’t require an actual pollster to do spurious polling. The “push” polls of election campaigns are an example of the nastiness for which spurious polling can be employed.

The challenge ahead will be to maintain public acceptance of the distinction between politicized “polling” in its various guises and objective, news-related polling. On the most partisan issue of recent, pre-election

politics—the Clinton impeachment and its surrounding events—media-sponsored polls were independent of the editorial policies of their media sponsors. The findings were not derided or dismissed to any meaningful extent by partisan clamor. The polls maintained their identity as objective news and played a significant political role by presenting the public’s unexpectedly even-tempered views.

The role open to polling was illustrated in a Thanksgiving-weekend editorial in the *New York Times*. It was entitled, “Stabilizing the Presidency.” One sentence began, “Polls show that Americans are quite ready to...” So long as politically significant findings are reported as *the polls show*, without being qualified by party origin or intimations of political sponsorship, polling will continue the tradition that George Gallup, polling’s greatest spokesman, initiated in 1935, when he called his new, syndicated feature, “America Speaks!”

Bernard Roshco is a past editor of Public Opinion Quarterly.

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