

## 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