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By Martin Plissner and Warren Mitofsky

# Too Close to Call in the Philippines

Long before anyone thought of exit polls, or even television, close elections were making fools of broadcasters in a hurry to get them over with. On November 7, 1916, Lee DeForest, the inventor of the vacuum tube, conducted the world's pioneer election night report and declared that Charles Evans Hughes had been elected president. More famously, in 1948, NBC around midnight awarded that year's election to Thomas Dewey. At 6:54 p.m. on election night in 1960, ABC gave 10 to 1 odds on Richard Nixon. Twenty-two minutes later CBS reported, "The trend indicates Richard M. Nixon will be elected tonight...."

Nothing in the past prepared us for November 7, 2000, though. Eighty-

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four years to the day after DeForest began it all, American television networks broke all prior records for election night folly by making two bad calls in the same night and in the same state.

For CBS, it was the second presidential election in which the right call was "too close to call." The first time the network got it right—but that election was not in the United States.

In 1986, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos was goaded into calling a special election by US television pundits who taunted him about having rigged elections in the past. He did this in a Sunday interview with ABC's David Brinkley. Then he invited foreign observers to come and watch Philippine democracy in action. Marcos called this election for no discernible reason other than to prove to his friends in the United States (then-Vice President George H. W. Bush in a famous toast saluted his "democratic ways") that he could win a fairly counted one.

CBS picked up the invitation. In early 1986 it sent its Election Unit decision team to Manila. They were Martin Plissner and Warren Mitofsky, the authors of this article, and Murray Edelman. The team hoped to create in a month the strategy, management structure, and body of background data needed to call a nationwide election—a process that in the US is assembled over the course of a year by a large staff.

Our plan was to draw a sample of the country's 86,000 "barangays," just as we would sample the precincts in a race for governor of California or senator from New York. When the polls closed on election day, we would collect the votes from these precincts and, using standard procedures, project a winner. There would be no exit poll.

Initially there was skepticism that there could be any doubt about the outcome. Marcos surely would not have called this election if there were any chance he could lose. His opponent, Corazon Aquino, was the

widow of an assassinated opposition leader. A political innocent, she had botched her *New York Times* interview with such confessions as “I’m getting so many crash courses at this point in my life.... What do I know about being president?”

A survey done by Marcos’ own pollster gave him a plurality over any opponent, but he was well short of a majority. In

and a variety of other kinds of tampering with the vote within each barangay.

Wholesale fraud was large-scale falsifying of returns from whole municipalities, and even provinces, after the votes were counted at the precincts. The chief check on wholesale fraud was an independent watchdog group, the National Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel). It had strong support from

elections going on,” he told us. “One is in the Philippines. The other is in the minds of the American people. We’re here to help Marcos win the second.” Winning 90% of the vote, as in the past, would not do. In the curious discussion that ensued, the consultant speculated on how *close* a victory Marcos would need to persuade Americans this election had been honest.

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a US election, a twenty-year incumbent with numbers like these would be in deep trouble. The common belief in Washington was that Aquino could win a free election, but that Marcos would easily be able to buy, steal or coerce the votes to beat her.

Election fraud was a universal given in Manila. It was spoken of, on the one hand, as retail, on the other hand as wholesale. Retail fraud was the kind that took place before the votes were counted. It included cash on the barangay buying of votes, as well as payments designed to keep an opponent’s supporters at home. (The manager of Marcos’ campaign in his home island, Luzon, directed our attention, with a smile, to the hundreds of millions of dollars which mysteriously disappeared from the publicly reported national bank reserves in the weeks preceding the election.)

Retail fraud also included making last-minute changes in the polling places and notifying only supporters of the government. It included intimidation of voters, vote officials and poll watchers. It included paying teams of “flying voters” to roam from precinct to precinct, stuffing or emptying ballot boxes,

both the country’s professional and cultural elites and from the Catholic Church, whose primate, Jaime Cardinal Sin, was a leading critic of the Marcos dictatorship.

Nanfrel organized what it called a “quick count.” It was designed to preempt the official canvass that would be done by the government’s Commission on Elections (Comelec) and certified by the country’s National Assembly—both of which were wholly controlled by Marcos.

We decided that our goal was to project the Namfrel quick count. This independent tabulation had the all but official blessing of much of the United States government—embassy staffers in Manila, State Department briefers in Washington, and observers sent over by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. A projection such as we planned could provide a further check on tampering by the Marcos-dominated Comelec.

How do you go about making a projection in such an election? How do you sample intimidation or vote-buying? How do you project hijacked ballot boxes and tampered returns? The bureaucrats who ran the government’s election machinery gave us free run of the dusty piles that held past returns from the country’s 86,000 precincts, an essential tool in selecting our 200-precinct sample.

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One morning an American political consultant who played important roles in the sitting US president’s campaigns turned up in the Manila hotel. “There are two

The hardest part of the project was providing election night communications. In a country of seven thousand islands with 58 million people, there

were fewer than a million telephones, most of them in a few large cities. We had to hire and train nearly two hundred vote collectors, along with ham and sideband radio operators, motorcycle couriers and foot-runners.

We even built a radio transmission tower in Mindanao—the island where more than a fifth of the vote was cast. We transmitted our vote counts in code on election day to protect the ham operators from having their

In many of the smaller cities, Aquino's margin was large. Aquino also had figured to do very well in Manila, but there Marcos money appeared to have reached more of the voters. Aquino was carrying the city handily, but it was like a Democrat winning only 55% of the vote in Chicago or New York City.

At this point our computers gave Aquino a slight edge. However, there were few reports from the Marcos

We threw up our hands and flashed the word to New York: TOO CLOSE TO CALL. Dan Rather opened the Evening News with, "The best we can say at this hour is that there appears to be a very close contest between President Marcos and Cory Aquino."

Having exhausted the possibilities of our precinct model, we turned to what would have been at home our normal backup, a model based on counties (in this case provinces). There were two possible sources for these. One was Namfrel, whose vote counters reached only 70% of the country. The other was a pool run by newspapers, which supported Marcos shamelessly during the campaign and whose principal members were owned by Marcos "cronies."

Even so, the press pool's procedures appeared thoroughly professional, and its numbers tracked closely with Namfrel's for regions where both had returns. Using Namfrel's returns where available, and the press pool's where they were not, we tried a projection 72 hours after the polls closed. Marcos had between 51 and 52%. Our verdict, still: too close to call.

By the time these calculations were completed, the evidence of retail fraud was coming in from all sides, and the issue was in any case moot. The final call was made not by the country's Supreme Court, but by the "people power" dominating Manila's streets and by the Philippine armed forces. At the end of the day General Ramos and Defense Secretary Enrile cast their lot in the streets with the "people power."

And who really had the most votes in the Philippines and in Florida? In either case, we may never really know. But, for network television, the conclusion reached in the Philippines would have been the winner in Florida as well: too close to call.

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equipment confiscated. Because it was widely believed that the country's telephones were bugged, we avoided using telephones.

As voting day approached, it appeared that Marcos might let a competitive election happen. He assigned General Fidel Ramos, an army officer with a clean reputation and long ties to the US military, to keep order at the polls. There were negotiations between the Marcos-dominated Comelec and Namfrel about conducting a joint "quick count," but they broke down at the last minute and delayed reporting of returns by either one.

For some time the only clue about what had happened at the polls would come from the CBS sample. When the polls closed, it was 2 a.m. in New York. Our goal was to have a call when the CBS Morning News aired at 7:00. When it did, there were no votes from either Comelec or Namfrel. At CBS News election headquarters in Manila, a third of our sample was in.

strongholds in northern Luzon. We could make an estimate based on past voting history in the unreported regions; but with no clues about the pattern of that year's voting and the prospect for wholesale fraud, all we said on CBS that morning was that we were looking at "a close division of the votes." That in itself came as a surprise to many Americans.

Eleven hours later, 129 precincts had reported. We now had a sizable number of returns from northwest Luzon, but none from the northeast—where Marcos' close ally, Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile, was in charge of delivering a landslide. So complete a radio blackout had been imposed there that none of our ham operators dared to send anything.

While Marcos was winning 2 to 1 in his own region, whatever the vote in Enrile's region turned out to be, it seemed unlikely we could show a margin of more than 4% for either side. That would not be enough to make a call even if all the votes were honest.