

# Election Night Heats Up— The Networks Race to Make the Calls

by James Barnes

At 6:00 pm on November 5, the presidential race was essentially over. President Bill Clinton in Little Rock and his Republican opponent Bob Dole in Washington, DC, were preparing for the final outcome of a year's worth of almost non-stop campaigning. But in network studios in New York City and Atlanta, where the results of that contest and scores of others would soon be telecast to the rest of the country, the race had just begun. As teams of analysts huddled around computer screens, the major television news divisions were resuming

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their competition to see which would be the first to report the results of the presidential, senatorial and gubernatorial races.

## A Rivalry Revived

For a while, the networks had foregone their spirited Election Night rivalry. After 1988, ABC, CBS and NBC decided to pool their resources to conduct one joint exit poll instead of three separate ones (as had been their previous practice). The main motivation behind this move was to save money. CNN was invited to join the consortium, and Voter Research & Surveys (VRS) was set up for the 1990 mid-term elections. The network officials decided that they could further their cost savings by also giving VRS the responsibility for “calling” the results of various races, rather than maintaining their own individual decision desks for that task. Via computer, all four network partners received the VRS projections simultaneously.

For 1990 and 1992, the competition among the television anchors to be the first to call a race was muted. But the truce was broken in 1994. That year, ABC employed its own crew of experts to analyze the exit poll and election returns to make calls on races that the network consortium didn't make at poll closing time. Nothing in the networks' joint exit poll arrangement prevented ABC from making its own calls, but on Election Night the other news divisions were caught completely off guard by ABC's maneuver.

In the biggest Senate race of the night, the three-way contest in Virginia between incumbent Democrat Charles Robb, Republican nominee Oliver North of Iran-Contra fame,

and independent candidate J. Marshall Coleman, ABC was the first network to call Robb the winner. And in the New York governor's race, where the best known statehouse leader in America, Democratic incumbent Mario Cuomo, was

facing a challenge from Republican state legislator George Pataki, ABC was the first to report that Pataki had upset Cuomo. “They embarrassed the hell out of the other networks,” said Warren Mitofsky, the former head of the network news polling consortium and an Election Night consultant to both CBS and CNN. “The hottest races of the night were on ABC and were not being called by NBC, CBS or CNN.” “There is always a competitiveness amongst the networks,” said Mary Klette, director of politics and polls at NBC. “When they see someone make a call before they're doing it, there's a why-aren't-we-doing-that attitude.” Not surprisingly, in 1996 all the networks set up their own decision desks.

## The Pressure is Real

Network news officials concede that the race to make election-contest calls was one reason for re-establishing their own decision desks. “Nobody wants to be last,” said Kathleen Frankovic, director of surveys for CBS News. But Frankovic added that the competitive nature of the networks wasn't the only factor in their decision. With the growing number of members in the consortium each network is able to have greater editorial command over its own Election Night broadcast if it employs its own team of analysts to call races or to review other races that aren't called at poll closing time.

Among those analysts are Mitofsky, working for CBS and CNN; Sheldon Gawiser, president of the National Council of Public Polls, and Baruch University statistician Martin Frankel, who both work for NBC; and Clark University political scientist John Blydenburg, who works for ABC.

Indeed, there are many bosses at VRS, which was renamed Voter News Service (VNS) in 1993, when the Associated Press joined the network consortium. In 1996, Fox Broadcasting took a seat on the VNS board. “Each [VNS] member has a real advantage [in that] they can focus on things they want to have an edge on,” said Murray Edelman, editorial director for VNS. If a network plans to highlight a story about Republican gains in Senate seats in the South during its coverage, it might want to have its decision desk analysts focus on the outcomes of those races instead of waiting for VNS to make the call.

The responsibility that Edelman and his analysts have to “focus on everything” tends to make VNS a little more conservative when it comes to calling races. “They have a lot bigger obligation to be cautious, and for the most part, they have been,” said Mitofsky. “If they say something wrong, everybody's got it wrong.” Edelman's cautious approach provides an opening for the networks to be a little more

aggressive in using their own decision desks to make a call before VNS does, and hopefully, before any of their rivals do.

Competition is a healthy feature in most business pursuits, and journalism is no exception. Indeed, it often sharpens the coverage of issues and motivates reporters to dig into a story. And on a presidential election night, when there are more than 100 important statewide calls to make in a period of about 6 hours, the pressure is real. "Sitting at the decision desk is a tremendous amount of pressure," said NBC's Klette. "If you do your job 100 percent, well, that's what you're supposed to do. I've got to tell you being at the decision desk is not my favorite thing. There is not a lot of glamour in making a call, and there's still the pressure, now that we're back competing." Edelman said that with the networks looking over his shoulder, he feels the heat, but added that it doesn't affect his decisions. "It does add a certain level of pressure, but I don't feel I have to beat them. There's no reason for me to take an unwarranted risk or an unacceptable risk."

### Mistakes Happen

Even with the networks employing their own analysts, they all made the same Election Night blooper in 1996—the call that Senator Robert Smith, R-NH, had lost his reelection bid. In fact, he defeated his Democratic opponent, former Representative Dick Swett, 49.4% to 46.3%. But it doesn't appear that the blown call was a result of competitive pressures. Edelman made the decision to call Swett the winner in the New Hampshire Senate race on the basis of results from the exit poll about six minutes before the state's poll closing time at 7:00 pm. None of the networks reversed their call until around 9:30, when Mitofsky, keeping an eye on the New Hampshire returns, advised CBS and CNN to retract the call. VNS quickly fol-

lowed suit. Later, so did ABC and NBC. It wasn't until around 11:30 that Mitofsky called Smith the winner.

Reviewing the mistake, Edelman explained that the problem with his call was that the interview sample for the New Hampshire exit poll contained too many Democrats, and thus skewed the VNS computer projection for the outcome of the race. "Our survey estimate showed Swett by a comfortable margin," he said. Edelman speculated that

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Republicans in New Hampshire may be more skeptical about the media or more unhappy about their choices in the election and thus were less inclined to fill out exit poll questionnaires. "We have a problem that is plaguing the industry—non-response—and there's a real potential for bias in that," said Edelman.

On Election Night, no one at the networks second-guessed Edelman because, said CBS's Frankovic, "The assumption is that VNS's calls are going to be more conservative." Nor does anyone fault Edelman for the mistake. "Calling that race was as good as calling Utah for Dole," said NBC's Klette. "There are times when you are doing it off an exit poll when you are going to make a mistake."

The other major error involving network calls in 1996 occurred last February, when ABC, CBS and CNN all projected that Dole would finish third in the Arizona GOP presidential primary behind magazine publisher Malcolm (Steven) Forbes, Jr., and conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan. That mistaken prediction was influenced more by the competitive stance that the networks have once again embraced in calling the outcomes than by sampling bias. In this instance, VNS was not at fault. Some time after the Arizona poll closing, Edelman correctly projected that Forbes would win the primary, and he did not call Dole third. But with his campaign already reeling from a loss to Buchanan in the New Hampshire primary, a third-place showing by Dole could have had a significant impact on the GOP presidential race and, thus, was of major interest to the network news producers. Afterward, a chastened Mitofsky, who had advised CBS and CNN to call Dole third, said, "When the frontrunner in a [presidential nominating] campaign looks like he's going to finish third somewhere, that's news, but it's just not worth the risk. It's bad judgment."

But even though rare mistakes always become very visible ones, it doesn't sound as though news officials feel the networks should pull back from their rivalry. Do they compete? "Absolutely," said Frankovic. But, "you would say they got carried away if there were four wrong calls [on Election Night], and that didn't happen."



*James Barnes is political correspondent  
for National Journal*