

### THE EXIT POLL CONSOLIDATION: An Interview with Warren J. Mitofsky

After nearly a year and a half of discussion ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN have decided to pool their election day projection and exit polling. The new unit will be called Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) and will be headed by Warren J. Mitofsky, who has been the executive director of the election and survey unit at CBS News. The VRS operation will be overseen by a board of managers, made up of one representative from each of the four networks. Affiliates, newspapers, magazines and others interested in specific electoral contests will be able to get data from VRS on an ad hoc basis. Public Perspective recently spoke with Mitofsky about the new venture.

**Public Perspective:** Would you describe the new organization that will do all exit polling for CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN?

**Mitofsky:** It's called Voter Research and Surveys. VRS is a self-contained research organization, much as the elections units at the networks were before this happened. It will do the exit polls and projections simultaneously for all the networks. Its permanent staff is about 25, and there are a lot of temporary people obviously — not just interviewers, but people who do special data collection during election year. We also will have a bigger clerical staff during the election year.

**PP:** Will you leave CBS to run the VRS?

**M:** It is *not* an incorporated business. It's what the networks would call a pool. What that means in a practical sense is that it has no business identity for tax purposes. That being the case, somebody has to pay me. It's going to be CBS. Still, I really don't work for CBS under this arrangement, I work for the VRS Board. As far as substance is concerned, they're my employer.

**PP:** Where did you get your senior staff? Where are your offices?

**M:** Mostly I kept the staff of the CBS Elections Unit. We are going to use the space that we had formerly occupied at CBS — at least for this year.

**PP:** What is VRS's work schedule for 1990?

**M:** We're going to do exit polling in every Senate and Governor race in the nation. Right now we're not going to do pre-election polling. After we get through this first election, we can consider expanding our activities. Our 1990 exit poll effort is quite comparable with what CBS did in 1986. However, it's much greater than what any network *would have done* in 1990 had there not been a pool.

**PP:** Will the new VRS differ substantively from the previous network approaches?

**M:** There is no pressure for projections anymore. Remember, everybody will have all the same material, at the same time. So what I suspect the public will see is much more concentration on analytical work. VRS is only collecting the information. We're not doing analysis for the networks. They will be competing on the quality of their analysis.

**PP:** How will the existing CBS/NYT poll be affected?

**M:** That effort will continue much as it has in the past. Kathy Frankovic will run the CBS end and Mike Kagay for the New York Times. They have competent help to do the different things, sampling and data processing and so on. The only thing they will lose is my input into it — but I don't think anyone is sitting around thinking they can't run a poll without me.

**PP:** Might the networks decide in the future to pool their regular polling, as they now do with exit polls?

**M:** No, I don't think they can pool any product that has a direct editorial consequence. Regular polls have such consequence. I don't think that projections did, frankly. So in pooling the latter, I don't think the networks gave up a whole lot.

**PP:** Election analysts are now going to have only one set of exit poll data, where there had been three. They're going to lose, aren't they? What about the general public?

**M:** If researchers' hearts are set on having three exit polls, they're going to be disappointed. On the other hand, the way things were going there was a possibility that they weren't going to get anything. That was a distinct possibility. I don't think that any network alone would have continued funding election coverage at the level it had previously.

The new arrangement is going to be good for the public, I think. They're going to get one high quality product, and they're going to get it on a *continuing* basis because now the cost is reasonable. I don't think they had any prospect of getting that the way things were going. And, with the competition for projections gone, maybe the old argument about the effects of exit polling on West Coast voters will dissipate. On the other hand, a lessening of competition in this area may have consequences for election analysts. We just don't know now. We will make a careful evaluation after the 1990 elections.

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