An * for 2002?

Another bad election night for VNS

By Martin Plissner

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"I hope I won't have an asterisk for 2002," says Marjorie Connelly of *The New York Times*, "in future portraits."

Connelly is responsible for the paper's *Portrait of the American Electorate*, a full-page spread that normally appears on the Sunday after a national election and promptly takes an honored place in every political junkie's clip file. Its tables tell you how as many as 115 categories of Americans have voted since 1980—in presidential years for president, in off-years for the House of Representatives.

The data for this portrait come from interviewing a huge sample of voters as they leave the polls. Since 1990, the data have been supplied by the pool of five television companies and the Associated Press that is now called Voter News Service.

What makes the VNS exit poll so popular with academics, political practitioners and junkies is that all other forms of survey research are subject to unacceptable levels of sampling error once you look past the bottom line of the total electorate. A typical telephone poll of a thousand adults will reach about 750 registered voters, of whom in an off-year about 400 will vote.

Such a survey is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus five percentage points on the vote for each candidate—and nearly twice as much on the margin between them. For even relatively large subsamples (e.g., men or women, urban or non-urban, past vote for president), the likely error soars. As for many small but politically interesting minorities—Jews, Hispanics, Asians, gays and lesbians, liberal Republicans—forget it.

For its last off-year survey in 1998, VNS tallied more than ten thousand interviews. There is no discount for the unregistered or for unlikely voters, all the respondents having been observed leaving a polling place.

As a result, you have roughly 25 times the sample size of a typical telephone survey. From it you not only get statistically valid samples of men and women, but you can break them down by age, race, marital status and so on. (In contrast to examining the overall gender gap, for example, you can find out that unmarried men are far more Democratic than married women.) You get usable samples not just of Protestants, Catholics and Jews, but of adherents of the religious right and, for the first time this year (if they ever get tallied), Muslims. In prior years, the only Muslim option was "other."

In 1998, the exit poll in Texas confirmed Governor George W. Bush's

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unusual support, for a Republican, from Hispanic voters. The national exit poll showed his huge head start for the Republican presidential nomination and, less prophetically, a landslide advantage over Albert Gore for the popular vote. Though Bill Clinton was in the throes of Monicagate, the exit poll made clear that opinions about the president had little effect on how the country voted for Congress.

You learned about this, as well as other matters on the public mind, from watching television on election night. To academic nags about "horse race" reporting, these election night insights are a standard answer. It's an important part of what the networks are paying for when they foot the bill for VNS.

That's if you can get the data into the VNS computers and get the computers to do what they're supposed to. Ordinarily, that's the easy part of what's done on election night at VNS. But this election night nothing was easy.

A new program for high-speed processing of all these data had been long overdue. The creakiness of the old one had little to do with the troubles of 2000, but the job had to be done, and the commitment of $10 million or so to it was a badly needed vote of confidence in the future of VNS.

The Battelle Company of Columbus, Ohio, a large computer firm with a good reputation for this kind of work, was hired for the task, but by mid-summer it became apparent that Battelle was well behind schedule for the 2002 election. It also turned out that the old system was being phased out, and it was too late to resurrect it for a backup.

As election night approached, VNS began advising its members of applications they could not count on. Many had never been tested or, when tested, had failed to pass. There were doubts, moreover, about how much traffic the overall system could handle without crashing.

Fearing possible shipwreck, the VNS crew looked for cargo to leave behind, and the national exit poll never got on board. On the day of the election, when the state exit polls seemed in danger of capsizing, over the side went the portions of those polls designed for analyzing the vote as opposed to calling winners.

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When it came to doing that, most of the networks finished the night with some reason to feel relieved. All but one (and the AP) got through it without a mistake—after 2000, the highest priority for everyone. But there was little else, for those who could, to celebrate.

As the polls began closing, after warnings all afternoon about the reliability of the exit polls, VNS finally issued a green light. By then, however, confidence at the networks about using it in making calls was understandably shaken. That in itself was not necessarily a bad thing. A large share of the contests in which most people were interested were much too close to be called on exit poll interviews even if all the systems were operating perfectly.

Such races are normally called by a succession of estimators based on real vote models, but even these were badly hobbled this election night. Low-tech collection of the actual vote, which customarily consumes about half the VNS operating budget, reportedly trailed the Associated Press wire, which has a separate collection system, and some of the websites of secretaries of state. CBS, fearing the worst, had prepared a team of analysts from key states to make calls based on the tabulated vote. Early in the evening it abandoned the VNS count altogether and took its data entirely from AP.

For the networks—especially cable news, which had to sustain live programming all or most of the evening while wondering throughout whether the specific program they were using was about to be withdrawn or the whole system was about to crash—this was a sorry return for the $30 million or so invested in the four-year VNS budget. On the whole, nothing approaching the disaster of Election Night 2000 occurred. But the post-mortems once again figured to be intense.

The first took place at an hour-and-forty-minute meeting of the VNS board of managers on Thursday, November 14. As of this writing, the board members had taken an oath of silence on what transpired, whose observance the Bush White House, or a Trappist monastery, might admire.

What is known is that both the VNS staff and Battelle gave reports on what went wrong. It's reasonable to suppose, based on prior intelligence, that the staff report was critical of both the design and the rate of delivery of the Battelle system. Battelle almost certainly argued that the system was never intended to be fully operational until 2004. Network lawyers are known to have been scrutinizing the fine print of the Battelle contract.

After another round of election night problems and bad publicity from VNS, there is clearly going to be some deep thinking about its future—the outcome of which at the moment is hard to predict.

As for all those exit poll data that failed to make their usual debut on network television, they have a hearty welcome waiting for them, should they ever be retrieved, at the Newspaper of Record and the archives of the Roper Center. In the days following the election blowout, VNS launched an effort to collect them—all 60,000, give or take a few. With any luck, it will get enough of them in a sufficiently varied distribution to yield a valid picture of who voted and why.

Then again, as of this writing, it might not.

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