

**Back to Chicken Entrails?
Problems of Opinion Polls in US Campaign 2000**

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Representation

The outcome of the 2000 Presidential election raised a series of questions about the political process¹. The Florida flaw, and multiple problems of electoral administration at county and municipal levels, serve to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the Presidential office. The closeness of the party balance in Congress promises to exacerbate problems of policy gridlock. The contrasts between the popular vote and the Electoral College vote raise constitutional questions about the fairness of the electoral system. Endemic problems of campaigns awash with dollars, with the total costs ballooning this year to an estimated three billion dollars, corrode the process further. But beyond all these major issues, what role did the opinion polls play, particularly the final Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll serving the networks and Associated Press, in exacerbating public concern about the electoral process? Three problems here, in particular, deserve close and careful scrutiny, along with a range of possible solutions.

Problems of Excessive Horserace Coverage?

The first issue concerns how much media coverage of the 2000 presidential election focused on the closeness of the horserace, as reported in successive opinion polls, and whether this emphasis was excessive. The extent of the horse-race coverage is not in dispute. Content analysis of the network evening news for ABC, CBS and NBC from Labor Day until the 7th November 2000, conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs on behalf of the Brookings Institute, reported that almost three-quarters (71%) of all election stories focused on the horse race, discussing who's ahead, who's behind, and behind-the-scenes campaign strategies². There is nothing particularly novel about horse-race journalism, but this type of coverage showed a sharp rise from previous races; for comparison the equivalent figures were 48% of all election stories in 1996, and 55% in 1992³. The pattern was fairly uniform across all the major networks, although the *Newshour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS proved the honorable exception, with only one third of their coverage devoted to the horserace, providing an issue-based alternative for those interested in hearing more details about George W. Bush's tax-cut proposals or social security lockboxes by Al Gore. The network's emphasis on the horse race

was evident throughout the general election campaign although this coverage surged during the closing stage, becoming the subject of eight out of ten stories in the week before polling day. Moreover as Diagram 1 shows, the majority of national opinion polls published during the campaign reported a close race, usually with a slight edge for Bush other than the post-convention Gore bump, although too close to call within the conventional margin of error. Some indicators proved more erratic, however, notably the *CNN/USA Today* Gallup tracking survey that became known among the press as the Nasdaq poll, because of its daily fluctuations. Another major complication was that the margin between the major candidates appeared to shrink in the closing stages in many key states, so that national polls provided an unreliable guide to the probable outcome of the Presidential race.

[Figure 1 about here]

Journalistic coverage of the horse race was therefore greater than usual, true, but was it unwarranted? This claim is based on a value-judgment. News judgments can differ, and some may prefer more issue-based substance, but the excitement of the race for the American public was probably fuelled in large part by the anticipated closeness of the outcome. Both major candidates chose to downplay major policy divisions, given conditions of widespread peace and prosperity. Although some claim that the journalistic emphasis on the horse race was overdone, it was probably justified in terms of the public interest generated by the wafer-thin margin on Election Day.

Problems of Early Calls?

This leads to the second, more serious problem afflicting the polls: the *early call* of Florida for Gore made between 7:49 and 8.10pm EST on election night by all the major networks (led by NBC) and the Associated Press, based on the VNS exit poll. At the time, with other major battleground states like New York, Michigan and Illinois falling into the Democratic camp, it appeared to commentators and observers that Al Gore was heading for a comfortable victory. There were a number of potential problems about this particular call. First, the result in Florida was announced on some (not all) of the networks before 8pm, which is before polling stations had closed in the Panhandle northwest counties of the state, in the Central time zone, counties that tended to favor George W. Bush. It is possible that this announcement could have discouraged a few Republicans from casting their ballots, if they believed that the outcome was

already cut and dried. This probably affected only a few Floridians although, given the closeness of the eventual outcome, every vote counted. The general practice of early calls as such is nothing new to this election; it is standard to broadcast the results of the East Coast states on all the major networks hours before the polls have closed further West. The most famous controversy arising from this practice occurred in 1980, when President Jimmy Carter's conceded defeat to Governor Ronald Reagan prior to the close of polls in California, thereby, it is argued, depressing electoral support for some Democratic House members in that state. In the same way, Republicans believe that the early call for Gore in Florida discouraged their West coast supporters whom they wanted to encourage to vote on their way home. Yet voting studies remain divided about the effects of early network calls on the electorate. On the one hand there may be a modest 'band-wagon' effect, if undecided voters move towards the candidate ahead in the race⁴. On the other hand, there may also be an 'underdog' effect, if early results slightly strengthen the motivation of those supporting the losing candidate. Given the lack of convincing evidence either way, a case can be made that both possible effects may cancel each other out, leaving no real residue⁵.

Problems of Accuracy

The problems of early calls would have been one of the perennial column-fillers beloved by pollsters, pundits and scholars, a minor matter for internal debate within pages of *Campaigns and Elections* or *Public Opinion Quarterly*, or indeed *Press-Politics*, rather than a matter of broader public concern, were it not for the third problem compounding the above: the *accuracy* of the network exit poll projections.

The regular pre-election opinion polls performed about as well as can be expected, by conventional standards. The acid test of the accuracy of pre-election opinion polls is the closeness of the final published predictions to the actual result. Five final polls can be compared based on fieldwork conducted on November 6th, the eve of poll, including those published by CBS, *CNN/USA Today/Gallup*, *Investor's Business Daily/Christian Science Monitor/TIPP* poll conducted by TechnoMetrica Market Intelligence, *Reuters/MSNBC* and *Voters.com*. All these except the CBS survey were tracking polls producing vote projections with the 'undecideds' reallocated through a variety of procedures. Other major polling companies avoided a Pepto-Bismol night by publishing their final polls earlier, including Harris (5th November), ABC (5th November) and Pew (4th November). The results of the five companies that can be compared,

given in Table 1, show that all the estimates of the popular vote proved within the final margin of error. In a race that proved too close to call, with the popular vote divided 48:48%, the campaign opinion polls generally held up well, although given the tightness of the race they proved unable to predict the winner.

[Table 1 about here]

The key problem sparking the conflagration of political debate concerned the election night exit poll used by all the major networks. Although there have been occasional notable kerfuffles over exit polls before, including the 1992 election night surveys commissioned by the BBC in Britain and the New Hampshire Senate election polls in 1996, these types of surveys normally have many advantages over conventional pre-election opinion polls⁶. The fact that people are selected at random as they depart the polling station means that there is no need to filter out the non-voters. The fact that voters are asked to say whom they voted for just minutes after casting their ballot should make this an accurate process, without the problems of post-hoc recall. The fact that the overall sample of voters is exceptionally large in the VNS exit poll used by the major networks (including 13,279 people leaving 300 polling places in the 2000 election) should make the results more reliable. But the critical key to any accurate exit poll lies in three major factors: (i) *the selection of a representative structured random sample of precincts*, and (ii) *the selection of a random sample of voters* leaving these polling places. And, it goes without saying, (iii) *accurate projection models* summarizing the results correctly, without human or mechanical error. The US networks build in two main safeguards into how the VNS exit poll results are used when projecting the outcome for each state. If the exit poll projection remains too close to call in any state, with a vote lead within a 3% margin of error, then the networks usually delay calling the state until further election results are phoned into the election analysis headquarters from a representative sample of precincts within each state. In turn, if the sample of precincts produces an estimated vote lead that also remains too close to call, then the networks usually wait until 99-100% of counties report⁷.

So what went wrong this time? As is well known, election night caused a roller coaster of emotions with everyone reaching for the anti-acid, not just the professional pollsters. Shortly after the networks awarded Florida to Gore at 8pm, Bush strategist Karl Rove went on air to dispute the numbers. The doors of the Governor's mansion were opened to the TV cameras and George W. Bush broadcast a brief interview, saying that it was too early for the networks to

call Florida. Then VNS warned the networks about potential problems with their results, in particular that their estimates had given too much weight to Democratic votes in some districts in South Florida. The pollsters had based their selection of 45 Florida precincts based on past voting behavior, not taking into account more recent demographic shifts. There was a problem with their over-Democratic sample in the Tampa area and also data processing errors in Jacksonville. At 9:55 pm EST CNN placed Florida back into the undecided category and all the other networks followed by 10:20 pm. Bush also started to pick up many of the smaller states in the mid-west and far west belt that have long been traditional Republican territory, making headway in the Electoral College vote. After midnight VNS delivered another update to the networks, indicating that with 98 to 99% of the precincts counted, Bush led in Florida by some 29,000 votes. Based on analyzing this data, at 2:16 am John Ellis, Bush's first cousin, who headed Fox News' election desk, called the state and thus the presidency for George Bush and all the networks followed shortly afterwards. VNS had not made the call directly, although their data was used in the calculations made by Fox. It now appears that two primary factors precipitated the second projection for President in Florida. First, raw vote data coming into VNS from Volusia County significantly overstated Mr. Bush's totals and significantly understated Mr. Gore's totals. Normally such variations in a single county would not be significant, but with the race in Florida as close as it turned out to be, this variation alone led ABC News to have more confidence in its projection than was warranted. Second, the VNS model projected significantly fewer outstanding votes at 2:10 a.m. than in fact was the case, leading the VNS model to underestimate the outstanding vote and thereby to overestimate the percentage of the vote that Mr. Gore would have to receive to prevail. Once again, these mistakes in the data and the models led the networks to make a flawed projection.

Newspapers prepared their infamous 'Bush wins' headlines and the projection followed across news websites. On ABC News, Peter Jennings did voice some health warnings with the projected Bush win in Florida, asking Sam Donaldson and George Stephanopoulos to comment if they had any reason to doubt the projected result but, isolated in the studio, neither did. As is well known, a few moments later, at 2:30 am, based on the network projection, Al Gore made his first phone call to George Bush, conceding the race, in retrospect perhaps the most critical mistake of his campaign. In the motorcade driving towards the planned concession speech at Nashville's War Memorial, Bill Daley, Gore's campaign manager, learnt that Bush's lead in

Florida had shrunk to 600 votes, automatically triggering a recount, and Gore subsequently made the second phone call to Bush, at 3:42am, ('Don't get snippy') withdrawing his earlier concession. By 4am, as Bill Daley announced that Gore's campaign continued before cheering supporters in Nashville, and all the network anchors reversed themselves for a second time, putting Florida back into the 'too close to call' category. The following morning New Mexico followed suit. The network projections produced a surge of emotions in the heightened partisan atmosphere of election night and the next morning as first the Gore camp, and then the Bush camp, thought that victory lay within their grasp. Many newspapers were only saved from another 'Truman beats Dewey' fiasco by reversing front-page headlines and pulping early editions in the wee hours of the morning, although collectors prized the ones that escaped the net. With hindsight, we can only speculate about some of the consequences of way the news media interpreted the VNS exit poll, but it is possible that if Florida had remained all night in the 'too close to call' category then perhaps some of the bitterness and heat of the immediate aftermath of pregnant chads and butterfly ballots could have been avoided.

What is to be done?

The election night coverage prompted Congressional hearings where the network executives produced the inevitable mea culpa. ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC — along with The Associated Press and Voter News Service - testified during hearings in mid-February 2001 held by the House Energy and Commerce Committee, pledging changes to prevent a repeat. Among other factors, the network executives cited a combination of flawed exit-poll methodology, a mistaken evaluation of the absentee ballots, and problems with the statistical model used. Ted Savaglio, director of the Voter News Service, said that a number of adjustments needed to be made in the projection system including using a larger sample of precincts in each state, developing new methods to account for the growing number of absentee ballots, rewriting its statistical models, improving its exit poll practices, and using the Associated Press as a secondary source of voting data. Beyond specific solutions trying to fix VNS, there are a number of options about opinion polls that can be considered, running down from the most drastic to the most practical.

One of the most radical options would involve a comprehensive ban on the publication of all opinion polls reporting voting intentions during the final stages of the general election campaign, as used in France. Given the First Amendment, however, such legislation would be

struck down by the courts as unconstitutional and anyway, in the public interest, this proposal has doubtful merit. Opinion polls provide invaluable information for 'strategic' or 'tactical' voters wishing to weigh the electoral prospects of two candidates, such as whether to vote for Nader or Gore, against a third such as Bush. Moreover, even if desirable, given the explosion of information leaking from traditional and Internet news outlets, it is doubtful if any legal ban on opinion poll publication could ever be applied in practice in the United States.

A second possible solution, addressing the issue of early calls, as recently proposed in Congress, would be to introduce uniform opening and closing times for polling stations across the whole of the continental United States. The potential advantages, proponents argue, would be that the period of time that Americans could vote would be identical throughout the country (except in Hawaii and perhaps Alaska), an important consideration given the idiosyncrasies of the current arrangements. Given concerns about low turnout, it seems unduly restrictive that at present polling stations in some states close in the early evening, well before many people have left work. In many other democracies, elections are held over a weekend, or polling day is declared a national holiday, in order to maximize opportunities for participation⁸. The difficulty facing the proposal to introduce uniform closing hours for polling stations is that this would probably only pass as part of a much larger and more complex package of reforms in the administration of the electoral process, which would standardize many procedures under an agency such as a revised Federal Election Commission, and which removed state control over many aspects of the process.

A more limited proposal addressing early calls within each state would be if the networks implemented a voluntary ban on this practice until 100% of the polling stations in that particular state had closed. After the election night fiasco network executives pledged that they would agree to such guidelines. Stricter implementation of this convention would help, but intense journalistic competition, and the existence of multiple Internet websites, complicates such a 'gentleman's agreement'. The number of phone calls that swirl around the digerati and cognicenti once the exit polls are released to journalists in the early afternoon make it extremely difficult to close down all publication outlets, especially with Internet iconoclasts like *Slate* and the *Drudge Report* websites, even if the major networks honor this convention⁹.

Rather than patching up the VNS consortium, the most practical suggestion would sound the death-knell of the organization by breaking it up to ensure that the TV networks and major

newspapers have more than one exit poll upon which to base their projections. VNS was established in 1994 by ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and the Associated Press, and in 1997 Fox became a full member, through the merger of two predecessor organizations. The first, the News Election Service, was founded in 1964 and collected raw vote data. The second, Voter Research and Surveys, was formed in 1989 and did three things: (1) polled voters as they exited the polling place; (2) reported the exit poll results; and (3) used statistical models to help project race results based on the exit polls and on vote data. Since 1994, VNS has performed the functions of both of these predecessor organizations. The members collectively share the costs of operating VNS and govern it through a Board of Directors consisting of one voting representative from each member. VNS data and analysis are provided to all of the members equally. In addition, many other news organizations subscribe to VNS, paying fees that partially defray operating expenses in exchange for projections and some VNS data. The problem is that such a cartel puts all polling eggs in one basket and the only other independent nation-wide exit poll in the 2000 campaign was conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*, based on a more limited sample-size. The break up of the VNS collaboration is under consideration by the networks and such a move would allow comparison of alternative independent estimates in future close elections.

[Figure 2 about here]

Lastly, there are obvious lessons for good practice in the reporting of pre-election opinion polls, exit poll results and state projections. In particular, journalists should give far greater attention to the health warnings surrounding coverage of any estimates, explaining the meaning and size of the 'margin of error' associated with any projections, and the emphasizing the fact where states are being called based on estimates not the final results. Moreover, as has been repeatedly stressed by survey analysts, news coverage should give priority to the great strengths of opinion polls: explaining the demographic characteristics and political attitudes of voters, rather than simply the vote projections. Opinion polls can play an invaluable role in electoral commentary by providing insights into the underlying reasons why people vote the way they do, including the public's policy priorities, issue preferences and social background. Opinion polls are flawed, for all the reasons already discussed. But other methods of electoral forecasting based on econometric models proved even more problematic in this election, for multiple reasons¹⁰. As part of the democratic process, for providing insights into the

mandate behind the outcome, there is no substitute for opinion polls beyond returning to runes and chicken entrails.

+ Figure 1 + Table 1

4000 words

Table1

Final Pre-election Opinion Polls 6 November 2000

	Date	Bush	Gore	Nader	Buchanan	Bush Lead
CBS	6-Nov	44	45	4	1	-1
CNN/USA Today/Gallup	6-Nov	48	46	4	1	2
Ibd/Csm/Tipp	6-Nov	48	46	4		2
Reuters/MSNBC	6-Nov	46	48	5	1	-2
Voter.Com	6-Nov	50	45	3.5		5
Poll Average		47	46	4	1	2
<i>Final Result</i>	<i>7-Nov</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>

¹ For an overview of the campaign and results see Gerald M. Pomper. Ed. 2001. *The Election of 2000*. New York: Seven Bridges/Chatham House; Pippa Norris. 2001. 'Of Pregnant Chads, Butterfly Ballots and Partisan Vitriol: The 2000 US Campaign.' *Government and Opposition*. 35(2): 1-24.

² The 2000 study of network evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC was conducted from 4 September to 6 November by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in conjunction with the Brookings Institute. I am most grateful to Robert Lichter and Stephen Hess for access to the data. For details see www.brookings.edu/GS/Projects/Hess Report. For further discussion see Pippa Norris. 2001. 'A Failing Grade? The News Media and Campaign 2000.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics*. 6(2):XXX-XXX.

³ For comparison with poll coverage in earlier campaigns see C.A.Broh. 1980. 'Horse-Race Journalism - Reporting The Polls in the 1976 Presidential-Election' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44 (4): 514-529.

⁴ Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar. 1994. 'Of Horseshoes and Horse Races - Experimental Studies of the Impact Of Poll Results On Electoral-Behavior.' *Political Communication* 11 (4): 413-430.

⁵ See S. Sudman. 1986. 'Do Exit Polls Influence Voting-Behavior?' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (3): 331-339; Ian Mcallister and Donley Studlar. 1991. 'Bandwagon, Underdog or Projection: Opinion Polls and Electoral Choices in Britain 1979-1987.' *Journal of Politics* 53 (3): 720-741; Rudiger Schmitt-Beck. 1996. 'Mass media, the electorate, and the bandwagon. A study of communication effects on vote choice in Germany.' *International Journal Of Public Opinion Research* 8 (3): 266-291; Robert Andersen. 2000. 'Reporting public opinion polls: The media and the 1997 Canadian Election.' *International Journal Of Public Opinion Research* 12 (3): 285-298.

⁶ For a discussion of the problems experienced in the 1992 British general election see Nick Moon and Robin McGregor. 1992. 'Exit Polls: Developing a Technique.' *Journal of the Market Research Society*. 34 (3): 257-268; Robert Worcester. 1995. 'Lessons from the electorate: What

the 1992 British General Election taught British pollsters about the conduct of opinion polls.' *International Social Science Journal* 47 (4): 539-549.

⁷ For the official statement of problems with the election night coverage published by NBC News see <http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/dailynews/electionsstatement010208.html>.

⁸ Ivor Crewe. 1982. 'Electoral Participation.' In *Democracy at the Polls*, edited by Austin Ranney and David Butler. Washington, DC: AEI Press; Andre Blais and Louis Massicotte. 2000. 'Day of Election.' In *The International Encyclopedia of Elections*. Ed. Richard Rose. Washington DC: CQ Press.

⁹ For a discussion of the controversies about posting exit poll results online in *Slate* and the *National Review* before the polls have closed in early primaries see J.D.Lassica. 6 March 2000. 'Forecasting the Ballot: A Clash over Exit Polls. *Online Journalism Review*. <http://ojr.usc.edu/content/story.cfm?request=341>.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the failure of these models see Larry Bartels and John Zaller. 2001. 'Presidential Vote Models: A Recount.' *PS: Political Science and Politics*. PS Online. <http://www.apsanet.org/PS/march01/bartels.cfm>.