

# What's Different From 2000?

An expert describes new TV network election-night reporting techniques designed to correct the flaws plaguing the last Presidential election and calls for a national uniform poll-closing time.

By Kathleen A. Frankovic

**M**ost Americans have vivid memories of the long-running 2000 election – and of the television networks' mistakes and embarrassment. We all know that the ultra-tight election showcased problems in the voting and vote-counting process, just as the television networks' 2000 election night mistakes spotlighted flaws in the system they had used for years estimating and projecting election results.

I have especially vivid – and painful – memories. I was in the control room at CBS News for the marathon 12-hour Election Night 2000 and for many of the following 35 days. On Election Night, at about 7:50 p.m. Eastern Time, all the data collected from exit polls, sample precincts and tabulated votes produced an estimate of a win in Florida by Democrat Al Gore. It then became clear as more data were collected that there was no clear Gore victory. In the early hours of the morning, after 2 a.m. Eastern Time, analysis of all the tabulated votes indicated a Bush victory in Florida – but even that projection was

not tenable once several counties corrected vote counting errors. CBS News – and other television news organizations as well – had first said Gore would carry Florida, later that Bush would carry Florida, and then that no winner could be projected.

A very unpleasant election night process for the country and for the news networks resulted in much discussion, deserved criticism and corrective action. Congress passed legislation to update voting equipment. The networks quickly focused attention on two election coverage concerns: the weaknesses in an analysis and projection system that had worked magnificently for 30 years, but was in need of updating, and the problems in reporting results on air in a way that made projections seem like reality and exit polls seem like vote counts.

Every television news organization involved in the 2000 problem reviewed its election night broadcasts, and produced a report promising changes. Along with Linda Mason, CBS News Vice President, Public Affairs, and Kathleen

Hall Jamieson, then the Dean of the Annenberg School in Philadelphia, I was one of the three-member CBS News panel. We produced and made public in January 2001 a detailed 87-page report. In February, Andrew Heyward, President of CBS News, joined other network news presidents and the head of the Associated Press at a Congressional hearing about media coverage of the election, where many of those changes were presented.

What should viewers expect on election night 2004? There are two areas where things really have changed: there will be technical improvements in the vote gathering and data analysis and differences in how elections will be reported. Here's a rundown of the changes that have been made and a guide to Election Night 2004.

## Improving the System

**A**fter the 2000 election, the promise was made to "fix" Voter News Service, the consortium that collected and processed the Election Day data for nearly a decade, or – if that didn't work – to replace it. In 2001, VNS began a complete review of its operations. Its members (ABC News, the Associated Press, CBS News, CNN, Fox News and NBC News) demanded a rewrite of the statistical models that produced the errant projections, and a committee of statisticians representing all the partners and several outside consultants produced revised models in 2001.

The changes were to be implemented through a completely rewritten computer system, with a voice interactive system to take in data. The job of writing that system was outsourced to Battelle

Memorial Institute, a giant organization and major defense contractor from Columbus, Ohio. Battelle soon discovered the magnitude of the project and the real-time demands that Election Day data input creates for any system. On Election Day 2002, the new input and processing mechanisms were overwhelmed by the constant flow of exit-poll data and tabulated results.

Battelle learned that putting together election day systems is more difficult than the uninitiated might expect – data come in nearly every minute and computations are run continuously as new data arrive. Computer displays must be immediately generated and updated. All this takes place in real time, with system failures immediately apparent. Battelle couldn't create that system from scratch in the time it had and ultimately VNS couldn't be fixed – so it was replaced.

The managements of the six member news organizations brought back two veterans of news election reporting, Warren Mitofsky and Joe Lenski. Mitofsky had created the CBS News election system 35 years earlier. He and Lenski, who now runs Edison Media Research, built a system for CNN in 2002, with its own input mechanism, computations, and displays. That small and limited system could be expanded to the rewritten statistical and quality

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control specifications all of the news organizations' statistical representatives had urged after the 2000 election. As for the collection of the tabulated vote, the networks would rely on the Associated

Press, which after all had been tabulating votes since the 1800's.

What are the specific system changes? First, the 2004 system will have better quality control, with more data checks, for one. Second, 2004 vote results can now be compared with more than one past election – and the researcher, not the computer, chooses which past race to look at for comparison. In 2000, the computer system's comparison of the Florida presidential contest with the 1998 Florida Governor's election contributed to the mistaken Gore projection. Third, additional resources will be devoted to tracking absentee voters in more states than before; they will be interviewed by telephone in the days immediately preceding November 2. No absentee voters were interviewed in Florida in 2000; a sample of them will be in 2004.

The projection system still relies on probability samples of precincts, and requires good data collection by exit poll interviewers and sample precinct reporters, but if the current reforms had been in place in 2000, the Florida mistakes would not have been made. The new system was in place and worked well for the 2004 primaries; there is good reason to assume it will work equally well in November.

## Changing the Coverage

**V**iewers won't see the computer system, and apart from a short explanation of how projections are made that all news organizations will offer early on election night, the computational models will be pretty much invisible to the public. What will be more visible will be the changes in reporting that have occurred.

First and foremost, even a brief explanation of how projections are made was missing from CBS News' 2000 Election Night broadcast. In its 12 hours of wall-to-wall coverage that night, we told viewers neither how the data were collected nor who collected it.

The CBS News post-Election Night Report promised that reporters would tell viewers how projections are made as well as explain reasons why a projection might not be made. In 2002, most networks assigned a reporter to explain the process, to show viewers what took place in the months before the election, the people engaged in preparation for election night (in 2002, the people at Voter News Service), and what was expected to happen through the day. In the case of CBS News, that reporter was Anthony Mason.

At CBS News, Mason showed viewers the decision team itself – the people responsible for making CBS News projections – to make it very clear that the projections didn't just emerge from a computer, or from the ether underneath the anchor's desk. He even appeared during the 2002 election night broadcast to explain why, even hours after polls had closed in Missouri, the outcome in the Senate race there was still unknown.

That decision team represents a second change from the 2000 election. CBS News, and other news organizations, expanded the number of its election decision makers after 2000 – more eyes would look at the data, more trained brains would analyse it, and more people would be able to stop a mistake before it went on air. In addition, at CBS News, a vice president was added to the group, to act as the liaison between the decision desk and management, the broadcast producers, and the anchor Dan Rather.

Vice President Linda Mason took on the responsibility of keeping all of them informed of the decision desk progress, what it could and – more importantly – could not project, letting the decision desk concentrate on the work at hand, and not the pressure of the broadcast or what competitors were doing.

Another change from 2000: in 2004, as in 2002, the CBS News Decision team will actually be in the election night studio. One of the discoveries of the CBS News post-Election Night Report was that correspondents in the field and in the studio were aware of vote-counting problems in Florida, but that information was never communicated to the people making projections. Had it been, the second Election Night 2000 Florida error might not have happened. Being located in the broadcast studio should eliminate that problem.

Third, the language associated with projections is now clearer and more carefully chosen. In the previous 35 years of successful election night reporting, the projection of results had lost any qualifiers. Reporters stopped saying, “CBS News estimates that when all the votes are counted, Ronald Reagan will carry Virginia.” They said simply “Bush wins Virginia,” making it easy for viewers to think that all the votes had been counted and that it was the television networks that had counted them.

Not only were the words far more definitive than they should have been, but so were the on-screen graphics. In 2000, CBS News election night graphics did contain the words “CBS News Estimate” but those words were small and gray, and placed at the bottom of the

screen. In 2002 and for the future, “CBS News Estimate” was and will be prominently displayed, in large type, in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. The viewer won’t be able to ignore the fact that an estimate is just that – an *estimate* – one made on the best available information, to be sure, but still an estimate.

Many news organizations will rely on their own resources as well as on the data collection of Mitofsky, Lenski and the Associated Press. In 2002, CBS News stationed ten stringers in critical states to

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alert the network to vote-counting problems and conducted its own polls of absentee voters in three states. Utilizing stringers provided a way of double-checking vote counts, discovering possible errors, and learning about problems faster than otherwise. And in 2002, CBS News absentee polls in three states where VNS was not interviewing absentee voters provided useful and exclusive information about voters missed in exit polls.

The networks will continue to make statewide projections as states close their polling places. But they have changed one long-standing rule: They will wait until ALL polling places in a state are scheduled to close before making a projection. That’s a change from the previous rule that permitted projections when the *majority* of a state’s polling places closed. This procedural change will affect eight states, including Florida, one of this year’s battleground states. And since all the polls must be closed before a projection is made, and since the

last polls close in Florida at 8 pm, there can no longer be any projection in Florida at 7:50 p.m. Eastern time – the time of the 2000 Gore call.

Of course, in a landslide – or even a clear victory – by one or the other candidate it will still be possible to know that he or she has won enough electoral votes to capture the presidency before the polls close on the West Coast, but at the very least the window in which that can happen has shrunk. News organizations

have an obligation to report the news; and the election results are among the most important news events in a democracy. The United States remains different from most other democracies, in that states count and report their votes as they close the polls, and poll closing times span six hours. Only a national uniform poll-closing time, something news organizations have supported since 1964, can eliminate that window.

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