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Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

Exit Polls: Better or Worse Since the 2000 Election?

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Introduction

There have been so many problems with exit polls in the last four national elections that news organizations approach 2008 election night coverage without a great deal of confidence in what those polls will show. The six news organizations that jointly conduct exit polls, ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and the Associated Press have been on a roller coaster ride since Election Day 2000, with a great many successes, some spectacular failures, enormous efforts to "fix" the polls, and millions of dollars spent in the process.

This paper will review the concerns with exit polls identified by the news organizations after the 2000 election mistakes, and update progress made since that time. It will also look at new concerns about exit polling raised since the 2000 election.

History

Throughout American history, journalists have covered elections. The American public learns election results from a free press in as timely a manner as the era's news delivery system allows. Today, the news cycle is one measured in instants, and the public expects rapid and accurate information "now." In the last four decades, exit polls have been a crucial and for the most part very accurate part of providing that information. Exit polls are surveys conducted as voters exit their polling place on Election Day. Reaching voters at that moment is important because it overcomes the problem pollsters have conducting telephone polls: people tend to misreport whether they voted or not. The "who won and why did they win" coverage on election night comes mainly from exit poll results, with the information reaching most Americans by

television, and increasingly by the internet. The development and evolution of exit polls is a story spanning 40-plus years.

In the summer of 1964, ABC, CBS, and NBC, along with the AP and UPI wire services jointly formed an organization called the News Election Service (NES) to pool resources to gather vote count information. By joining forces, the news organizations hoped to get more accurate vote totals nationwide than any one organization could get on its own. The calling of races and the interpretation of election results, though, were done separately by the individual news organizations.

In 1967, Warren Mitofsky, widely known as the "father of exit polling," began conducting them for CBS News. Advances in computer technology enabled the quick analysis of large amounts of data, and the competition to have the best election night coverage drove the development of the methodology. Exit polls collect information gathered from large numbers of citizens (more than 100,000) as they leave their polling place on Election Day. Most importantly, exit polls ask for whom the voters cast their ballot, but they also gather demographic information to determine whether differences in such things as income, age, race, gender, and education impacted voting patterns. Typically, the exit poll also questions the voter's position on issues that were important in the race. On election night, analysts tell the story of the election using all of this information, which is broken down state by state, critical to telling the electoral college story, and nationally.

By 1980, with networks conducting individual exit polls, results were being used not only for interpreting election results, but also for competitively

projecting races. That year, NBC News announced that Ronald Reagan had won the presidency three hours before some polls had closed on the west coast, resulting in an early concession speech by Jimmy Carter. This was the first great exit poll controversy. Critics argued that the early call depressed turnout in the west. Exit polls were criticized by Congress and hearings were held. The networks agreed not to report results until most polls were scheduled to close in any given state.

In 1984, however, all three networks used exit poll results to declare Ronald Reagan the winner over Walter Mondale before polls had closed in the west. Congress then passed a resolution urging broadcasters to voluntarily refrain from characterizing or projecting the results of an election before all polls for the office had been closed. Taken literally, that would mean no presidential winner could be declared until polls had closed in all states, including Alaska and Hawaii. Even in a landslide election, networks would have to sit on the news until well after 11:00 p.m. ET. In the age of "instant news" and the internet, that is a scenario difficult to imagine. In practice, the networks continued to follow a state-by-state policy, calling races when most of the polls in a given state were closed.

In 1985, the presidents of ABC News, CBS News, and NBC News were called to testify about exit polls and projections before the House Subcommittee on Elections. At that time, Congress was exploring the idea of adopting a uniform poll closing bill, in which all polls in the continental United States would close simultaneously. NBC's Lawrence Grossman, who testified that day, says the news chiefs made a promise not to "project or characterize" results in any state until after its polls closed. Grossman wrote in 2000: "Our promise to Congress

was a mistake that continues to haunt television's coverage to this day." Grossman adds:

> On any given election day, anyone who listens to what reporters, analysts, anchors, and campaign staffs say on the air can figure out well before the polls close who's ahead, who's behind, and how close a race is. The only way not to get an early peek at the voting trends and results is not to turn on any television, radio, or computer.[1]

In 1990, ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC, in an effort not only to save money, but also to address public concerns about the ultra-competitive nature of election projections, formed Voter Research and Surveys (VRS). This consortium conducted joint exit polls for the 1990 and 1992 elections, and provided the networks with simultaneous projections. With this pooling of information, access to the early waves of incomplete exit poll data became a hot political commodity on Election Day. Political reporters traded information with political insiders all day. Although the partially weighted data is not meant for public consumption, during the 1990s, most of the people who saw the early data knew its limitations.

In 1993, NES was folded into VRS, and the Associated Press became a partner with the networks in the newly formed organization, Voter News Service (VNS). Fox News became a VNS member as of the 1996 election.
VNS provided both exit polls and vote counts. But the competitive nature of election night coverage again became an issue, when ABC News formed its own decision desk and was able to call races significantly ahead of the VNS projections in the 1994 election. Subsequently, each network developed its own "decision desk" to call elections, separate from the VNS projections. The

network projections were based on statistical models that combined historical information about past voting in sample precincts, the exit poll data, actual vote count, pre-election polls, and in-house election experts.

Over the first 30 years, the exit polls had a reputation for accuracy in projecting election results. During the 1990s, VNS had excellent results: only one error in 700 projections.[2] It is important to remember, though, that the raw data from exit polls has always required careful weighting with actual vote totals and comparison models. The data streaming in as Election Day progresses has never been "accurate" until it is weighted. Before internet sites started releasing leaked partially weighted data, leaving the public with the impression that the numbers were "off," exit polls had a very good reputation.

Historically, exit polls have also provided deep and reliable analysis of election results. Academics depend on the data to understand the changing American electorate. Political stakeholders use the data as they develop strategies and policies, attempting to understand public opinion. Exit polls help journalists frame the meaning of election results as early as the night of the election. While winning and losing campaigns offer their preferred explanation of the cause of their victory or defeat, journalists use exit poll analysis to explain who voted for whom and why. In this way, the "election mandate" discussion begins not with self-serving politicians, but with non-partisan analysts characterizing results based on the large data sample provided by exit polls. The value of the timeliness of the exit poll information, particularly in the speeded-up news cycle, cannot be under-estimated. Americans form opinions about the "why" of a given election very quickly, and these first impressions are apt to last a long time.

There are other studies done of issues of importance to voters, but it is the size of the sample, the timeliness factor, and the fact that those interviewed just finished voting that makes exit poll data so highly valued. Plus, the exit polls present data gathered in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, every national Election Day, providing highly specific regional breakdowns of voting trends over time.

The 2000 Election

Things started going badly for exit polling in the 2000 election. In such a close presidential race, with Florida being a decisive state, VNS made a bad call. Even before all the polls had closed in the state, VNS called Florida for Al Gore at 7:52 p.m. The networks and the AP made the same call, all at about the same time. Some two hours later, the call was withdrawn. At approximately 2:00 a.m., the networks (but not VNS and AP) called Florida for George Bush, and that call was withdrawn within another two hours. The election was simply too close to call.

The evening's mistakes cannot be blamed on exit polling alone. The problems had as much to do with bad vote counts and bad information reported by local election officials as they did with any problems from the VNS election models. However, in the aftermath of the 2000 election problems, each television news organization commissioned a report on its own election night errors. In those reports, several concerns about exit polling were raised.

Much of the internal criticism focused on how exit polls were done and how projections were made. The conclusion of CNN's publicly released review summarizes what the other networks found as well:

> The supposedly sophisticated system of polling is not nearly sophisticated enough. It is a flawed system that fails to take into full account many dynamic factors—absentee balloting, early voting, demographic change in key precincts, a declining response rate to polling generally, the quality of questionnaires, vote undercount, mistaken balloting, computer error, human error, and more.[3]

Recommendations for fixing the exit polls post-2000 included upgrading the VNS computer system, reviewing the statistical models, conducting additional research on the non-response and exit poll errors, studying the absentee voter situation, and providing quality control in the vote counting operations.[4]

The networks and the Associated Press have continued exit polling in each general election since 2000, and have worked hard to fix the problems identified seven years ago. Pressure from the public and politicians in particular to "get it right" has been constant. There have been calls to end exit polling, mostly because of controversies over early projections and the 2000 election problems. Former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford led a bipartisan review of the 2000 elections, reporting to Congress on July 31, 2001. The National Commission on Federal Election Reform was highly critical of exit polls and made the following recommendation: "The Commission strongly encourages citizens not to participate in exit polling."[5]

Post-2000

The Computers and Technology

Although VNS overhauled its computers and custom software systems after the 2000 election, at a cost of approximately ten million dollars, they simply were not ready in time for the 2002 election. The exit polls were a disaster. There were massive technical failures on election night, yielding no useable exit poll data. Political scientist Michael Traugott, who has studied exit polls for years, says there was another problem: the VNS statistical models were out of date. These models of individual precincts, used to project the outcome of races, were conceptually appropriate but did not use the latest statistical theories and models available.[6]

By 2003, the pool members shut down VNS and formed the National Election Pool (NEP), hiring Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International to conduct the 2004 exit polls. Edison/Mitofsky (E/M) had to design, develop, and implement a full exit poll and election projection system starting in January 2003, which would be ready in time for the 2004 primaries and election. Although there were two technical disruptions on election night in 2004, those problems did not impact the accuracy or delivery of the exit poll results. There were no obvious technical problems in the 2006 election.

The Absentee/Early Vote

In reviewing their 2000 election coverage, the networks expressed concern about the growing number of absentee/early voters nationwide and the potential impact on the accuracy of future exit polls. The underestimation of the 2000 Florida absentee vote numbers was a contributing factor to the exit poll problems in that state. VNS had estimated the size of the absentee vote to

be 7.5%, based on historical data. In reality, it turned out to be 12% of the total Florida vote.[7] Also, although VNS had correctly assumed there would be a higher percentage of absentee Republican voters than Election Day Republican voters, the estimation made was too low, probably because of a significant Get Out the Early Vote (GOTEV) effort by the party. With such a close election, the number and party breakdown of absentee voters were critical factors in predicting the outcome of the election, and the exit poll model was not accurate in estimating either.

What has happened since 2000 is that the quiet revolution in the way Americans vote has continued. Without great attention being paid to the trend, the country is slowly moving away from Election Day voting. Because election administration is so decentralized in America, it is difficult to accurately track the state-by-state and county-by-county voting rules, but there are some clear trends that jeopardize the accuracy of future exit polls.

Alternatives to Election Day voting have been introduced with increasing frequency, with the number of people who choose "convenience voting" escalating. Methods of convenience voting are expanding, with the liberalization of absentee ballot laws, the expansion of vote-by-mail elections, and the growing number of in-person early voting options (hereafter, the term "early voting" will generally refer to all of these voting options). This trend is likely to continue as states and counties across the country look for ways to encourage people to vote, reduce lines at polling stations, and save money on Election Day. Voters have responded, not necessarily by voting at higher rates[8] but by signing up for early voting options in greater numbers every year. In nearly every state, the percentage of those who voted earlier than Election Day

rose between the 2000 and 2004 general elections.[9] In some states it was a significant increase. In fact, by the 2004 presidential election, 26 million voters opted to cast their ballots early. That represents more than a fifth (approximately 22%) of those who voted nationwide.[10]

Looking at some key states and the most recent trends, the percentage of those who voted absentee/early in California's general elections are telling:

2000	24.5%
2002	27.1%
2004	32.6%
2006	41.5%[11]

As many states are doing, California is making it easy to vote early. Residents can now register as permanent absentee voters. Votes can be cast as early as 29 days before Election Day—necessitating the development of innovative campaign strategies to cope with the rolling voting schedule.

Looking beyond California, there are a number of states in which early voting has caught on in a big way. Here is a look at the ten other states with the highest percentages of convenience voters in the 2004 general election:

Oregon	100%	
Washington	67.8%	(88.5% in 2006)
Nevada	53.1%	
Texas	51.1%	
New Mexico	50.6%	
Colorado	47.8%	
Tennessee	47.3%	
Arizona	40.8%	
Florida	35.9%	
Arkansas	33.4%[12]	

If the trends continue, and they are likely to do so, these convenience voting numbers will be even higher in 2008 and subsequent elections. What does this mean for exit polls? Respected survey research expert Paul Lavrakas calls the situation a "time bomb for 2008," saying "the early vote data has become just as important as the exit poll data" in many states.[13] In fact, exit polls are no longer conducted in Oregon, where all voting is done by mail, or in Washington State, because of the high level of early voters, according to Joe Lenski of E/M.[14]

Whereas in previous decades, it was relatively easy to estimate any given state's absentee/early voting outlook, the rapid rise in the number of these voters from election cycle to election cycle makes it difficult to do that now. There is simply not enough historical data against which to compare current results.

Again looking back at 2000 and the way VNS incorrectly estimated the number and party breakdown of Florida's absentee voters, many questions are raised for further study. How closely do early voters resemble Election Day voters, and can assumptions be made about those similarities or differences? How does that differ state to state? How does that vary from election cycle to election cycle? Also, how do news stories that break just before Election Day, after many early voters have cast their ballot, change the voting differences between the Election Day voters and the early voters? Political scientist Marion Just remembers that Ross Perot's assertions that Republicans were planning to disrupt his daughter's wedding, a story that broke two weeks before the election in 1992, caused a shift in support for Perot just before Election Day.[15]

Studies done by early voting expert Paul Gronke found that "early voting varies in reasonable ways: voters who are willing to identify with a political party, voters from areas with higher commute times, incomes, and average educational levels tend to cast their ballots earlier."[16] Gronke also cites several studies showing that early voting options tend to attract the most politically active voters. In some areas of the country, that is an advantage for Republicans, and in some areas Democrats benefit.[17] Other studies find little partisan difference between early voters and Election Day voters.[18] There is evidence that older Americans are more likely than others to vote early.[19]

Although early voting systems themselves do not seem to benefit one party over the other, regional party mobilization can impact shifts in the partisan breakdown of those voters. For example, Democrats in Iowa focused turnout efforts on early voters in 2006. At one point, Democrats outnumbered Republicans five to one in requests for absentee ballots, although the parties each have about the same number of registered voters in the state.[20] These party efforts to get their most ardent supporters to vote early can vary from one election to the next, causing significant impact on the accuracy of early voting estimations. The NEP will have to devote significant (and growing) resources to pre-election telephone polling to get accurate information about how and why the early votes were cast.

In a review of the 2004 exit poll results, Edison/Mitofsky recognized the need to upgrade the telephone surveys measuring the early vote results. They suggested that the size of telephone samples of early voters increase in future elections, particularly in states where the absentee vote is a "large proportion" of the total vote.[21] Back in 2000, Joe Lenski and Warren Mitofsky were

running the CNN/CBS decision desk on election night. When interviewed for CNN's review of 2000 election coverage, they expressed concern about mistakes caused by early voter levels far lower than the ones seen in 2004:

> Mitofsky and Lenski, believing the current VNS exit poll models are inaccurate in states where the absentee vote is more than 10 per cent, also recommended that phone surveys be conducted in advance in states where the absentee vote is expected to be that high.[22]

As the 2008 election approaches, 30 states have early voter rates greater than 10%.[23] Edison/Mitofsky is increasing efforts to account for these voters with telephone surveys. Joe Lenski says the number of pre-election telephone polls was increased for the 2006 election to cover ten states, and will be increased again in 2008. However, as the number of pre-election telephone polls increases, so does concern about the impact on the accuracy of exit poll projection and analysis results.

For example, a primary reason that exit polls are so highly valued is that the individuals surveyed have exited a polling place where they have just voted. Their memory of how and why they voted is much more likely to be accurate than it would be at any other time they are surveyed. And, since studies show that voting is such a socially desirable behavior that people will tell pollsters they voted when they did not,[24] exit polls all but eliminate the percentage of those who would lie about actually voting. With the telephone polling necessary to measure the early voting results, the uncertainties of memory and actual voting behavior must be weighed into the results. As the percentages of early voters go up, so do the percentages of those uncertainties.

Telephone polling in general is a survey method with its own problems. Every polling professional knows that the number of people willing to respond to telephone polls has dropped lower and lower as Americans have been overwhelmed by telemarketers and telephone solicitations. Answering machines and Caller ID service have compounded the problem, with more people refusing to answer calls from numbers they don't recognize. Pollsters also have been dealing with the ever-increasing number of Americans who have no landline telephones. Three out of every 20 American homes have no landline telephone, though most of those homes have at least one working wireless phone.[25] Paul Lavrakas says that surveying persons reached on cell phone numbers in the United States is a very complex undertaking. He says that there are enormous challenges to doing it legally, ethically, and in ways that gather the highest quality data. These telephone survey problems are escalating just as the accuracy of exit polls will be more dependent on telephone polls to measure those who vote early.

Another factor to consider has to do with the youngest voters, those most likely to have only cell phones. In 2004, 4.3 million more 18- to 29-year-olds voted than in 2000, a 9% increase in turnout (from 40 to 49%), and more than twice the turnout increase for the overall electorate.[26] Overall, they represented 17% of voters. In the 2006 midterm election, young voter turnout increased for the second major election in a row with an increase of 3% over the 2002 midterms.[27] As the youth vote numbers increase, they become a more important subset of the electorate. And, there is some evidence that at least those in college vote at a high absentee rate.[28] While there is little information about the overall absentee rate for the 18- to 29-year-old voters, the inability to reach this growing group of voters who carry only cell phones will present

ongoing challenges to the NEP. Despite the fact that research shows you can weight poll data to compensate for not being able to reach the young voters who have only cell phones,[29] as their numbers increase and as the numbers of cell-only Americans increases in general, the challenges to the NEP grow commensurately.

Summarizing, the need to supplement exit poll results with substantial telephone polling in order to get as accurate a picture of the early voters as possible is clear. For the NEP, however, this is an expensive (and complex) undertaking at a time when financial pressures continue to rise.

Non-Response

In general, people are less inclined to respond to polls than they used to be. This trend impacts all kinds of polling methodologies, but is evident in the declining willingness to respond to exit polls as well. In their reviews of the 2000 election coverage, the news organizations expressed concern about the declining response rates. Here's what the numbers look like:

1992	60%
1996	55%[30]
2000	53.7%
2004	53.2%
2006	45% (non-presidential election)[31]

Warren Mitofsky noted that in the 1960s and 1970s, exit poll response rates were in the 70-75% range. He speculated that the later decline in response rates was due to many factors: the bad public reaction, starting in the 1980s, to early projections on TV; the criticism by Congress of TV's early projections; the laws in some areas that require exit poll interviewers to stand 50-300 feet back from

the polling place; and the overall decline in response rates to all kinds of surveys.[32] Other factors may include the widespread criticism of exit polls after the 2000 elections, and the public's continuing distrust of the media in general.[33]

Even though the exit poll response rate continues to slowly decline, Dan Merkle and Murray Edelman published research in 2002 that found little relationship between response rates and survey error. Further, they found surveys with higher response rates were not necessarily more accurate.[34] So, although the NEP members were concerned about declining response rates in 2000, and the rates have continued to decline, this is not a major problem in and of itself.

Non-Response Bias

Although the response rate alone does not cause survey error, with a lower response rate there is a correspondingly higher risk of non-response bias. If the group of people who choose not to take the exit poll voted significantly differently from the group that did choose to respond, the poll results will have an overall "bias." An example: In 2004, the exit poll response rate for voters age 60 and over was 43%, compared with a 55% response rate for younger voters.[35] That level of differential response would skew results if the data were not corrected. Every effort is made to weight the data for the differences in response rates that can be observed (such as age, race, and gender), but differences that cannot be observed may not be fully accounted for until the official vote returns are in.

In the last two national elections, 2004 and 2006, there was a statistically significant Democratic bias in the raw exit poll data gathered at the precinct level. In simple terms, after the election, the estimates gathered by polling place interviewers are compared to actual election results. In 2004, precinct level exit poll results overstated the Kerry-Bush difference by 6.5 points in favor of Kerry. In 2006, the exit poll's Democratic-Republican margin was overstated in favor of the Democrats by 6.2 points.[36] As exit poll data came in on Election Day 2006, it was clear that Democrats were again being "oversampled." That led at least one NEP member, Fox News, to announce on air (9:25 p.m. ET) that they would not rely on exit poll numbers in their projections.

The level of exit poll error in the last two elections is the highest since records have been kept, though the overall tendency to over-sample Democrats has been in evidence for the last several election cycles. The problem is seen elsewhere as well. In 2006, a private company doing a statewide exit poll in Wisconsin found significant Democratic bias in two of the three races they were polling. The greater willingness of Democrats to participate in the Wisconsin poll, and the higher than expected number of absentee voters contributed to the problem there.

In the review of their 2004 exit poll results, Edison/Mitofsky reported the primary reason for the bias was likely to be that more Democrats than Republicans agreed to participate in the exit poll. E/M found no evidence of problems in how data were processed, nor in the sample selection of the polling places. In an interview, Warren Mitofsky blamed the problem on "the failure of interviewers to follow the selection rate."[37] Interviewers are

supposed to follow a strict pattern of selecting voters, such as every third or fifth voter, in order to get a randomly selected sample. But polling places can be confusing and crowded, and interviewers can be pressured by those who volunteer to take the survey, particularly in precincts where few people selected agree to respond.

The Edison/Mitofsky report also mentioned several factors that may have contributed to the bias in 2004, including distance restrictions imposed on interviewers by local election officials, weather conditions, precinct characteristics, questionnaire length, etc. However, E/M's chief recommendation for improving the bias in future exit polls was better training of the polling place interviewers. They committed to hiring fewer students and young adults in the future, because older interviewers delivered better precinct level results. They looked at other factors that correlated with skewed response data including the race and party affiliation of the interviewer.

It is still unclear exactly what caused the Democratic bias in the 2004 exit poll data, but improvements made for the 2006 election did not eliminate Democratic over-sampling. Joe Lenski of E/M said there was better training of interviewers before the 2006 election, and some on-site supervisors were hired. Efforts to eliminate the poll bias in 2008 continue to focus on the interviewer selection and training, and what Michael Traugott calls the "logistical nightmare of hiring and training"[38] this very large temporary staff for a single day's work every two years.

Stanford University political scientist Jon Krosnick is an expert in survey methodology. He has another suggestion for tackling the Democratic bias.

Having done extensive research on how ballot name placement affects vote choice, Krosnick notes that the Democratic presidential name is always listed first on the exit poll questionnaire. He suggests that name placement be varied.[39]

It is important to note that the exit poll bias existed in the raw data, but did not cause any incorrect projections to be made. Once vote count totals were merged into the exit poll results and the data were weighted to correct for over-sampling, the results proved accurate. However, in order for there to be confidence in future exit polls, the bias must be accounted for and corrected.

One final point about exit poll bias that has been raised by several academics and Pollster.com's Mark Blumenthal involves transparency. The news organizations running exit polls for the past four decades have had a policy of confidentiality in the precinct-level data. In order to protect the privacy of voters who participate in the surveys, a certain level of specificity in the data is never released. Some academics think that the NEP could "blur" precinct locations enough to protect voter privacy, thereby allowing scholars full access to archives of raw data. Michael Traugott and others explain that's not what's happening now:

> The data that are deposited are weighted in a complex way that accounts for some nonresponse adjustments, the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and, most importantly, to the actual outcome of the election… When the outcome of past elections was not so close and the introduction of new voting technology was less common, this was a satisfactory procedure. But in the context of the leaks in 2004, the competing theories about why and how this happened, and the quality of the exit poll results, data weighted to the actual outcome of the votes was no

> longer a satisfactory dataset for many consumers of exit poll results.[40]

Particularly because of the issues of bias, it is possible that full disclosure would give the public and academic researchers more confidence in the data. With so many citizens concerned about election integrity since the 2000 election problems, those who conduct exit polls cannot appear to be "hiding" data. Pew Research Center president Andy Kohut points out that the process of voting has become more politicized, with citizens challenging the accuracy of official vote counts, and with bloggers insinuating voting fraud in recent elections.[41] Views of the media have also become polarized, and any perception that the media are hiding data makes the exit polls appear suspect, even when they are not.

Leaking of Exit Poll Data

The leaking of early and only partially weighted exit poll numbers in 2004 caused much public confusion. Those numbers appeared on multiple internet sites on Election Day, and they indicated a strong showing for John Kerry. Some sites crashed because of the heavy traffic, with the Drudge Report, Slate, and others seeing huge increases in visitors. Early exit poll data had leaked onto the internet in 1996 and 2000, without much public notice. In 2004, the prevalence of political blogs and increased web traffic caused the data to move among sites at lightening speed, reaching millions of people. Most of those people had little contextual understanding of the data. Richard Morin wrote in the *Washington Post*:

> If a few hours on the roller coaster of ecstasy and agony were all that anyone had to endure, only the political junkies would be interested in the whys and wherefores of the exit poll confusion.

> But the false picture had real impact: The stock market plummeted nearly 100 points in the last two hours of trading, and the evening news was replete with veiled hints of good news to come for the Kerry campaign.[42]

Even today, a vocal minority believes those early waves of exit poll data in 2004 were "correct" and Kerry actually won, despite the final results of the election.

The NEP was so concerned about the leaks in 2004 that they put a strict quarantine in place for Election Day 2006. Only a handful of officials from the NEP saw the early, partially weighted data. The quarantine worked, and will be used again in the 2008 election. Even though in 2006 the public did not see the over-sampling of Democrats in the early data, it was there. No one in the NEP is comfortable knowing that the precinct level problem has yet to be solved. Paul Lavrakas served as a quarantine room monitor in 2006, watching the early waves of data come in: "I experienced firsthand how precarious is the confidence of the NEP media sponsors in the validity of the exit poll data."[43] Mark Blumenthal[44] got a call from "someone on the inside" of the NEP saying "do not trust any exit poll data tonight."

The Single Source Problem

Before the networks and the AP joined forces to conduct a pooled exit poll in 1990, networks conducted individual exit polls. Network and print journalists wrote stories analyzing election results by looking at more than one stream of data. No journalist likes having a single source of information on a news story, but news organizations can no longer afford to run parallel exit polls for purposes of comparison. The public would clearly be better served with multiple exit polls, because when single-source data are wrong, there is limited opportunity for correction. Marion Just calls the current situation "an insidious

problem that over weights this single stream of data because every news outlet uses the same story."

It's easy to see how much of an editorial problem is caused when exit poll analysis data are "off" in the first news cycle. One example of how a second source of data would have contributed to a better understanding of election results happened in the demographics area of the 2004 exit poll. On election night and in subsequent news cycles, media organizations reported that President Bush received 44% of the Hispanic vote, citing the only source available, national exit poll data. This result surprised many observers because it was a large and unexpected increase over the president's 2000 support from Hispanics. The story got a lot of attention. Two weeks later, the exit poll data were corrected to reflect final election results. The difference was significant:

Bush – Kerry	44 – 53	(Exit Poll – election night)
Bush – Kerry	40 – 58	(Exit Poll – corrected results)[45]

One reason for the change was that E/M had incorrectly weighted the absentee vote, particularly in Texas, which has a high number of Hispanic voters. John Harris of the *Washington Post* wrote about confusion over the numbers a month after the election:

> Political analysts are still scratching their heads over what share of the crucial Hispanic vote President Bush won last month. … News media exit polls on election night reported Bush winning 44% of Hispanics this year, a startling nine percentage-point jump from 2000. Some skeptics weren't buying it, saying the data were flawed.[46]

The combination of having only one source on election night and the ongoing problem accounting for the early voters caused incorrect demographic information to be reported on election night.

Some academics have called for an additional, independent national exit poll to be conducted.[47] This is a scenario that is highly unlikely because of the cost of such an undertaking. The *Los Angeles Times*, which has run its own national exit poll since 1980, recently announced that for financial reasons they would no longer be doing that. Director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program Robert Blendon thinks the NEP news organizations should rely on more extensive and competitive pre-election surveys to put together as full a picture as possible in trying to understand election results and voters' motivations, so they are not as reliant on exit polls election night.

In the 2000 election reviews, the networks also identified having limited sources of vote tabulation as being an issue of concern. But in 2000, there were still two sources of vote count: VNS and the Associated Press. The CBS News review said that if they had checked both of those sources in 2000, the second incorrect call of the evening, the call for Bush at 2:17 a.m., would not have been made. The AP's vote count was corrected one minute before CBS News made the call, but they had not seen the correction, relying only on the VNS count.[48]

The vote count situation now is worse than it was in 2000. There have not been two streams of vote count since the 2002 election. AP now provides the sole source of vote count data, although some individual state websites are becoming more reliable with back-up information. Even though the AP's vote

count has been reliable, accurate, and has built-in redundancies, it is still another single source of key information on election night.

Finally, having a single source of data on election night means that there is no back-up if and when the system crashes. That is exactly what happened in 2002, when technical failures overwhelmed the exit poll system.

The Questionnaire

The exit poll questionnaire is written by a committee of NEP members. Many academics, including Robert Blendon, find evidence of a disappointing "group think" in the questions, particularly in recent elections. Andy Kohut agrees that the questionnaire has become "too homogenized" because of the group effort, and suggests the NEP hire someone to design the best questionnaire possible. Paul Lavrakas thinks the NEP needs a strong academic voice guiding questionnaire development. Jon Krosnick, who has done extensive research on survey questionnaires, also worries about the "sub-optimalities" of the current exit poll questionnaire design, and urges the NEP to do further study on improving questionnaire quality.

Since the answers to the exit poll questions provide reporters in the first post-election news cycle the single most important editorial information as they frame the election mandate, getting the questions right is all-important. Looking back at the 2004 exit poll, the question about "moral values" is still a highly controversial one. The exit poll found that "moral values" topped the list of issues deemed most important to voters. Jon Krosnick worries that the question forced people to rationalize their vote choice, while giving them limited options to choose among. The *National Journal* covered the issue:

> Designers of this year's most widely used exit poll defend inclusion of the "moral values" category, which was chosen by 22 percent of voters, because the Bush re-election campaign focused on the phrase. But to the poll's critics, "moral values" is a vague, appealing catchall category that distorts more than it reveals about voters' political attitudes. One objecting pollster said that adding "moral values" to a list of more conventional issue options was much like asking voters, "'what do you like best—red, green, blue, or breathing?"[49]

The *National Journal* points out the "real-world political consequences" of misinterpreting election results. In 2004, groups opposed to abortion rights and rights for gays cited the exit poll "moral values" mandate as evidence that they deserved legislative rewards from the president and the Republican-controlled Congress. Richard Morin of the *Washington Post* was harsh in his criticism, saying the "moral values" issue added to the other problems of the 2004 exit poll:

> It seems clear now that the 2004 exit polls were rife with problems, most of them small but none trivial. Skewed samples, technical glitches and a woefully inept question that included the undefined term "moral values," in a list of concrete issues all combined to give exit polling its third black eye in as many elections.[50]

Robert Blendon and Michael Traugott, both deeply appreciative of the rich data about the electorate provided by exit polls in the last 40 years, worry about the future of the exit poll analytical data. All of the polling experts consulted thought that in the pre-1990 era of exit polling, when the news organizations each did their own polling, the product was more robust and provided a better collective judgment about the election results.

Projections

After the 2000 election, ABC News announced it would project the winner in a race in a given state only after the last scheduled poll closing time in that state.[51] The other NEP members made similar announcements. Prior to that time, races were sometimes called when the "overwhelming majority" of polls in a given state were closed, which is why the initial 2000 Florida projection was made when polls were still open in the western panhandle. Many politicians were hoping for more restraint, again raising the projection issues first discussed with Congress in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, however, the birth of cable TV and the explosion of news sites on the internet have created a high-speed 24-hour news cycle. Leaked exit poll data, as discussed before, have been widely reported in the blogosphere by "citizen journalists" bound by no agreements with the NEP, or Congress for that matter, about guidelines for reporting on elections. No longer is the issue of discussing election reporting in the hands of three gentlemen network news division presidents, as it was in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, in 2005's "Report on the Commission on Federal Election Reform," the following recommendation was made by chairs Jimmy Carter and James Baker: "News organizations should voluntarily refrain from projecting any presidential election results in any state until all of the polls have closed in the 48 contiguous states."[52] Instead, news organizations continue to counter that a uniform poll closing time across the country would resolve the issue, since at least the NEP members have voluntarily agreed not to project races until each state's polls are closed.

In reality, since the 2000 election, news organizations are reluctant to be first calling the closest elections. The ultra-competitive race to be first slowed down after the embarrassment of calling Florida incorrectly in 2000. Exit polls had been so accurate up to that point that the level of confidence in the data was high. In the reviews of their 2000 coverage, the networks each discussed internal changes to be made in the way they would call races in the future, including how and where they would run their decision desks, terminology they would use in estimating winners, and circumstances under which they would not rely on exit poll data to project winners.[53]

Conclusion

Exit polling was the right methodology at the right time when it was developed in the 1960s. No academic or polling expert would invent the same system today. It needs to be reinvented or replaced after the 2008 election.

With the changing ways Americans are voting, the many problems associated with all types of polling, the ability to provide deep and instant data to individual news consumers on the internet, and the ability to use the internet to reach individual voters, there are challenges and opportunities for new ways to measure election results that did not exist in the 1960s.

The challenges include finding new ways to survey a large sample of representative American voters, whether they vote early or on Election Day, in order to tell a timely and accurate story about election results. A concomitant challenge for the news organizations involved is finding ways to financially support these efforts. It is a very expensive proposition to undertake what Paul

Lavrakas calls "the single largest data collection and analysis that takes place in one day on the planet."

There are many suggestions about how to do this post-2008. A particularly difficult issue is how to achieve the same individualized, 50-state data collection using any other methodology. Joe Lenski, Paul Lavrakas, and others would like to see the NEP invest in research and development to overhaul the exit poll methodology, developing new statistical sampling models. New models would have to address today's cycle-to-cycle changes in early voting patterns and precinct demographics. Opinion Dynamics chairman John Gorman thinks a re-do should start from scratch, that there is "too much modeling and not enough straight-forward polling" in the current system, and that it is too complicated.[54] Several survey research experts suggested small changes, such as modernizing information delivery from the field, upgrading from paper ballots to using wireless handheld devices that instantly transmit results.

In 2006, when he was asked about the future of exit polling, Warren Mitofsky said he expected projection models would have to change.[55] Others have suggested replacing the current exit poll with a hybrid of "best of" methodologies: a smaller national exit poll in key states coupled with rich pre-election telephone polls, Election Day telephone polls, and an internet panel. In Norway, the use of a "telepanel" as an Election Day poll has been quite successful, and was watched with interest by Warren Mitofsky. A panel is recruited and interviewed by telephone a short time ahead of the election, and then re-interviewed on Election Day.[56] This is a methodology considerably cheaper than exit polling, although it would be difficult to accomplish a 50-state breakdown of results.

Many academics think internet polling is the future, particularly with 71% of American adults now using the internet, and all other polling methodologies under siege.[57] No one suggests a total reliance on internet polling at this point, though, because of the sampling limitations. Minorities and senior citizens are still under-represented among internet users. Many internet polls are "opt-in" and considered unreliable and unscientific. However, some academics and news organizations are already experimenting with using different types of internet panels to question voters. Steve Ansolabehere of MIT had success with a large internet panel in 2006, using a matched random sample weighted to compensate for under-representation of certain demographic groups, and will do the same in 2008.[58] The Associated Press-Yahoo is working with Knowledge Networks to survey voters throughout 2008 using a probability-based online panel designed to represent the U.S. population. Jon Krosnick of Stanford has a grant from the National Science Foundation to experiment with "best of" polling methodologies. These efforts deserve careful review.

The opportunities include using the internet in new ways: providing transparent and searchable exit poll data to individual users; delivering real-time election results directly to users; explaining and archiving poll results for future research. In some ways, the rich data provided by exit polls could be even more important in the internet age. The many thousands of people who searched the internet for leaked exit poll data in 2004 showed that there is a real market for even faster delivery of incremental election reporting. The exit poll data, once the purview of experts and academics, could be more accessible to all. When he was with Hotline, NBC political director Chuck Todd proposed a for-profit model of exit polling as a new business. He thought there would be

an audience for a pay-per-view TV show on Election Day, with every wave of exit poll information shown directly to viewers. Reporters would explain all the shortcomings of the early waves of data, but viewers would have the same access to live information that news organizations now have. In a 2004 election *Online Journalism Review* post, Slate media critic Jack Shafer had a similar idea about delivering and demystifying exit poll results:

> The exit poll numbers are being swapped from NEP to its clients to politicians and journalists to boardroom big shots today like crazy, so why shouldn't civilians have access to the information? I trust readers and viewers to see the exit polls for what they are.[59]

The NEP will conduct exit polls again for the 2008 election, making every effort to compensate for the problems and challenges already discussed, spending millions of dollars to gather the data. In the event of another very close presidential election, it is quite likely that exit poll results will again be controversial. But whether exit polling is replaced or reinvented after 2008, news organizations will still rush to tell voters who won an election and why. It is what American voters want to know, and deserve to know, on Election Day.

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