

ELECTORAL ICEBERG AHEAD

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By calling Florida wrong twice -- first for Al Gore, then for George W. Bush -- television networks hit an avoidable iceberg that had been on their radar screen for many years. This blunder contributed mightily to the confusion and rancor that followed, which hasn't fully subsided. Attention has been paid; that iceberg won't be hit again. But there is another one looming -- bigger, still ignored -- that should be addressed by Congress.

After the election, in an act of corporate courage, CNN commissioned an independent panel to investigate what went wrong on that infamous night. Along with two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner James Risser and Joan Konner, former dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, I was asked to serve on that panel. CNN President Tom Johnson gave us the opportunity to question whomever we wished, to obtain any documents we wanted and to write a report that would be made public.

The report begins, "On Election Day 2000, television news organizations staged a collective drag race on the crowded highway of democracy, recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the country, and their own credibility, all for reasons that may be conceptually flawed and commercially questionable."

CNN has examined our report and others; the material is on the CNN Web site. They have responded with a list of reforms. These include not using exit polls for projections in close races, not projecting a winner in a state if the

balloting shows that there is less than a 1-percent margin and not projecting the winner in a state until all the polls are closed within that state.

In short, the early projection of statewide results will be slowed down appreciably. Such reforms, by CNN and the other networks, should take care of any Florida-like situations in the future. But that leaves the rest of the country. Let me go beyond our report.

Americans hold about a million separate elections in the course of a four-year cycle. Only one, for president, is national and continental, albeit conducted indirectly through separate winner-take-all contests. In America, for practical purposes, that presidential election includes four time zones.

The case has been made, passionately, that early reporting of states in the East influences voting in the West. Democrats were outraged in 1980 when the networks called the presidential race for Ronald Reagan early in the evening. That announcement, said Democrats, depressed Democratic turnout, negatively influencing some congressional races as well as other "down-ticket" offices and referenda. In 2000, it was the Republicans who were outraged, claiming that early state calls for Gore depressed Republican turnout in the Florida Panhandle (which is in a different time zone than the rest of the state), as well as in western states.

Or consider the 2000 election if the electoral math had worked out somewhat differently. Republicans might have claimed that closely contested races in Oregon and Washington would have gone Republican if the networks had not started talking about Gore's winning ways in the East. (GOP Sen. Slade Gorton lost in Washington by only 2,229 votes.)

Clearly, as the networks now concede, an election jurisdiction with two time zones, such as Florida, shouldn't be called until all polls are closed. Why, then, should a national race be called before that national jurisdiction has all its polls closed?

In the early 1980s, angry congressional hearings were held. Unanimous resolutions were passed asking the networks to exercise restraint for a couple of hours every four years during a delicate moment in the democratic cycle. The networks refused. They had First Amendment rights! No one was going to tell them how to cover an election -- certainly not politicians.

The academic judgments on the matter of early counting vary widely. It is not known whether early election calling significantly influences voting behavior while the polls are open. But surely there may be a small effect. Florida taught Americans that small numbers of votes can have enormous leverage and incendiary effect in a nation whose interest groups have an all-purpose slogan: "It's Not Fair."

CNN and other networks have endorsed "uniform poll closing" legislation. This would jiggle ballot hours and daylight savings time in order to get Americans voting together in real time. It is a complex solution.

In the aftermath of Florida, there is an easier way, fully respectful of First Amendment rights. It is quite apparent that there will be a new law sending money to the states to modernize their election systems. Hang the chads! Death to the dimpled ballots!

But such monies should be conditioned, as are most federal grants to states. The states should get the funds only if they don't release ballot counts until polls close

on the West Coast, just as if this were one large country with four time zones. That condition, coupled with network restraints on early exit poll use, would avoid the next iceberg.

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