

## **NETWORK ARROGANCE**

*United Media Syndicated Column*

June 7, 2001

Florida be damned! After having discredited the American electoral system in 2000, arrogant as ever, the five major commercial television news networks and the Associated Press have decided to continue their sponsorship and direction of the Voter News Service consortium. There will be some reforms, but Americans will continue to have televised "projections" of winners and losers well before the votes are counted and released.

That means that there will be people in different parts of the country, from both parties, particularly in the West, who think the system is rigged. Swell; we need another conspiracy.

"Projection" is an idiotic system. I have written about it, researched it, sat on a CNN outsiders commission investigating it, and have yet to hear a satisfactory answer regarding WHY the networks do it. They lose money at it. They gain no competitive advantage, because all use the same source and get information simultaneously, while they misleadingly pat themselves on the back for a unique job well done.

Some network executives and journalists justify their practice in heroic mountain-climbing terms. We climb the Himalayas because they are there; we report the news because it is there. They cite academic studies to prove that early calling in one state or region doesn't influence voting behavior in later-voting states. Sometimes they go negative. You can't stop us, they say, we are protected by the First Amendment.

This is mostly garbage. Exit poll results are hardly true news -- they are manufactured

news which would not exist unless the networks spent \$35 million to create it. This is not as bad as egging on a riot in order to get good television footage, but it's much the same practice. The academic studies show a variety of results. Most important, all concede that voter participation may (stress may) be depressed, perhaps only by very small numbers. But, folks, Florida was about small numbers of voters; so was Oregon, so was New Mexico, so was the Senate race in Washington.

Reform? It is a staggering task, even if the goal were worthwhile. The infamous Florida exit poll was more than 7 percent off the actual result. Other state exit polls were up to 20 points off! How will VNS deal with the growing number of absentee ballots, which are, by definition, not picked up by exit polls? How will they deal with the growing refusal rate of voters to answer questions asked by exit poll enumerators, which rose to about 50 percent in 2000?

Aha! They will use more pre-election telephone polling. But telephone polling is in worse shape than exit polling. It takes 100 calls now to get 20 answers. Why? Telemarketing (aarrggh!!) and over-polling have stolen our patience with unsolicited calls; answering machines and Caller ID let us screen them out. Nor can pre-election phone surveys replicate sentiment on election day. (Remember, George W. Bush lost votes because of the last minute drunk-driving revelations.)

Alas, political public opinion polling is a useful part of our public lives. We deserve information about why people voted, how voters behaved by group, and so on. But not at the cost of undermining the credibility of the election process itself. The networks have four years, 365 days a year, 24 hours a day to do their stuff, and they won't lay off for two hours on election

night, before resuming their chatter. All this notwithstanding the opinion of the public and pleas from political leaders across the political spectrum for 20 years!

Nor is this necessarily a once-every-four-years problem. With a 50-49-1 Senate and a close House, the election story in 2002 will be nationalized. Suppose Southeastern Democratic incumbent Senators get drubbed, indicating GOP recapture of the Senate; will it depress Democratic turnout in West Coast elections?

Congress could prohibit early reporting of Election Day exit polling. But that might be unconstitutional and set a bad precedent.

What to do? If more voters refused to answer Election Day exit polls, the quality of VNS data would go from terrible to meaningless. So unless the networks reform, practice saying "it's none your business," if approached by an exit pollster. (Or, if asked to respond, you can even lie, doubling their trouble.)

And state and local officials can help. Votes are "held" from the time they are cast to the time officials tally them and release them to the press; that can be 12 hours, or more. Why can't they hold them for two more hours before releasing them? Why doesn't Congress, when (and if) they offer election reform funds to the states, condition such aid to holding votes until all of the lower 48 states have voted?

That would force the networks to report the news, not make it.

**Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and is the moderator of PBS's "Think Tank."**

©2000, *NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.*