

commentary

from other pens...

Exit polls valuable aid, not great crystal ball

By Will Lester
Associated Press Writer

MONTREAL (AP) — Exit polling remains a valuable tool for previewing results before votes are counted, but last year's presidential election provided a reminder that there's no such thing as a crystal ball.

The polls that have become a central part of American elections are undergoing an overhaul, and journalists are re-examining how they will use those polls.

Pollsters had their image sullied a bit after the election fiasco and they're working to restore the trust in Voter News Service, the organization that conducts exit polls.

"We've been so successful at projecting it's easy to forget they are projections," VNS editorial director Murray Edelman told a meeting of pollsters Thursday night. "If we weren't so trusted, it would not be such a big deal when we were wrong. I don't think we're going to be so trusted for a while."

The overhaul was a major discussion at the pollsters' gathering. VNS is a polling consortium funded by ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC and The Associated Press. Created in 1990, it provides polling information to the organizations, which interpret the data independently.

On election night Nov. 7, all six VNS members initially projected that Al Gore had won Florida, a key to winning the presidency. The news organizations later said Florida was "too close to call," but early on Nov. 8, five VNS members declared George W. Bush the winner in Florida. The AP was the only one not to declare Bush the winner on Nov. 8.

Those who run VNS are overhauling how exit polls are conducted and used. Pollsters attending the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research got a preview of the steps being considered by VNS and by the journalists who rely on the exit polls.

Edelman noted VNS has had a good record over the years — a 99.8 percent success rate. And he outlined some of the factors behind the faulty exit poll projection that led to the Gore call.

He said the absentee vote leaned more toward Republicans than anticipated. And he said several other polling error factors leaned toward Gore, giving the illusion the Democrat had a substantial lead and was positioned to win the state handily.

"This was a truly extraordinary situation," Edelman told the meeting. "The bad luck is it happened in an extraordinarily close race. "But it also showed us there were some real problems in a system that has served us well over the years."

Among the many targets for improvement for VNS cited by Edelman: —Increase the amount of data collected, especially in close races. —Do a better job of anticipating tabulation errors. —Give elections analysts better access to the history of what's been reported through the night in close states and counties.

Kathleen Frankovic, director of surveys at CBS News, told how journalists are examining changes to improve the conducting and use of exit polls. VNS members agree no state should be called when any polling places in that state remain open.

Other suggestions being considered by some VNS members include: —Setting tougher standards for when to call a state. —Consider prohibiting projections of extremely close races. —Provide better explanations of exit polls and projections using them. —Push for uniform poll closing times around the country. —Provide more information from all sources to those making the calls.

Frankovic said they have been scrambling to provide fast and accurate results for more than 150 years, and competition is going to continue. Edelman had a caution for all who rely on exit polls.

"Statistics is a science of controlling risks, not avoiding them," he said. "If you want to avoid risks, you wait until all the votes are counted. ... And if you really want to avoid risks, you wait until they're official."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers polling and politics for The Associated Press.

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The remote control president

WASHINGTON — In the 6th century B.C., the men of Athens would vote annually on whom to ostracize, to banish, from the country for 10 years.

Why? Because people get sick and tired of the same big shots always having their names in the buzz. Just like we hated the same guys always running for student office back in high school and college, we despise seeing the same grown-up politicians always trying to grab the limelight.

The Athenian ritual of ostracism was a way to rid the capital of someone who had gotten too popular, too dangerous, too ambitious or simply too in-your-face.

Washington enforces a similar system. If you get your head too far above a certain line in this city and keep it there for too long, the people here have a way of lopping it off. There is a finite supply of fame and celebrity, and people of this capital, like their counterparts of ancient Athens, don't like to see someone trying to hog it all. That goes double for newcomers.

The Clintons never understood that. Bill and Hillary were in the paper and on TV every time you looked. They were the prom king and the prom queen, presiding forever at the edge of the dance floor for all to see.

And people here hated it. George and Laura Bush must have noticed. Since taking office, the new president and first lady have rationed their publicity as if they were sharing the last canteen on the lifeboat.

How does an American president run the country without putting his face in our faces? The way



chris matthews

• commentary

Dwight Eisenhower did: operating through a "hidden hand," as Princeton's Fred Greenstein described Eisenhower's approach of delegating the big jobs and the big publicity to a strong Cabinet; and by refusing to deal in personalities.

That's exactly how Bush has done it. He had Colin Powell get the EP 3 crewmen home, then he got Don Rumsfeld to say we were right once they were home. Rather than greet the returning Americans, he again left the honor to others.

Can you imagine Bill Clinton passing up such a fat meal of "I feel your joy" media coverage? The only time he let a cabinet secretary grab credit for something was when he let Janet Reno roast in public after Waco.

Bush has followed Ike's lead not to engage in personalities, by avoiding fights — Reagan vs. Tip, Clinton vs. Gingrich — which constitute a surefire claim to national media attention. It's also a reliable, reader-friendly story line. Bush has done everything he can to avoid a public feud. He's cozied up to Ted Kennedy and California's George Miller on the education bill the way Ike did with Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn on domestic issues on which Democrats held the edge. He's succeeded,

so far, in staying above the hard battle John McCain is waging on campaign reform.

Mary Matalin, a White House aide with a sense of history, defends the Bush's hidden-hand presidential style:

"The upshot of having ... a strong Cabinet with the kind of leader that he is, is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It's an efficient place. You show up on time. You make your points precisely, and you get done on time. This is not a White House about meandering, and pizza parties, and staying late to show off. It's about getting your work done and doing it in a way that you're accountable for and you're advancing the agenda."

The danger for Bush is that his cold, remote style of leadership will deny him the necessary public support when times get tough. President Eisenhower was an American hero when he entered office. He had become that by leading the allied forces in Europe during World War II.

George W. Bush has no such claim to fame. He lacks the cushion of affection that we gave forever to the man who received the Nazi surrender. By keeping his distance from us, by refusing to warm himself to the national embrace, this man from Texas has staked his personal success on those of his energy and economic policies. If they fail, so will he.

Chris Matthews, chief of the San Francisco Examiner's Washington Bureau, is host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels. The 1999 edition of "Hardball" was published by Touchstone Books.

I believe farming has a future

"I believe in the future of farming, with a faith born not of words but of deeds - achievements won by the present and past generations of farmers; in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come up to us from the struggles of former years."

These powerful words were written by E. M. Tiffany and form the opening paragraph of the Creed of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) organization. I first heard them 40 years ago as a 14-year-old freshman in high school.

I still believe in the future of farming, though I'm acutely aware of the current challenges. The 90s were good for the overall U.S. economy, but tough on agricultural producers.

For the past 40 years, I've lived and watched the challenges of farmers and ranchers. The going has gotten tough and only the tough are still going.

As a young man, I planned to live on the family farm. However, costs increased, prices fluctuated, debt grew and I grew disillusioned. My mother, who had been responsible for the farm since dad died, decided to sell. A neighbor made an offer that would clear the debt and allow my mother to purchase a modest house and a dependable car. For her, it was a great relief.

I went to work in Chicago - 450 miles from the farm - and light years away from the culture. The people I worked with couldn't tell a "Model 70" from a "Super M" and didn't know a plow from a planter. They thought food came from a grocery store.

All through the years, I've stayed in touch with my roots. I'm not "on the farm" but I am still "of the farm." And today, farmers and ranchers still have my greatest respect.

Do abortions beget clones?

To the Editor:
A homely, humpbacked dwarf married a pretty retarded mermaid, claiming "we'll have kids with my brains and thy beauty," but their progeny got his "4-F" physique and her intellectual impairment.)

If there were no abortions, is there a need for clones? What if they cloned Billy Graham... (Oops) ...got Bill Clinton, or a litter of 15 or so? (A gal instead of a guy), who payeth for the rejects?

Socialism spawns moral decay! Depriving people of their personal obligation and challenge to provide, their necessities, food, clothing, shelter, amusement is top priority. Any vice is chance for excitement and thrill, believing the socialist/



don taylor

• minding your own business

Some continuing trends

1) Fewer producers required. Today only two percent of the U.S. workforce is committed to agriculture production. Fewer farmers and ranchers are feeding more people. And, we all are being fed for less, with more convenience.

2) Value-added foods. In the 1950s, 47 percent of the consumer's food dollar bought raw materials or products. Today only 23 percent of the food dollar is product.

The remaining 77 percent is value added packaging and services. The consumer today wants, and will pay for labor savings and convenience. They want their chicken cut up, skinned and ready to bake. They want their vegetables cleaned, seasoned and ready in minutes. They want finished entrees with all the trimmings and they may even choose to pick up the whole meal on the way home from work.

3) Lower cost of food. While most consumers assume that groceries cost more today, it's not true. U.S. consumer spending on food has dropped from 16.9 percent of disposable income in 1960 to only 10.7 percent today. Today's food buyer is getting more for less.

Challenges and opportunities
As we enter the 21st century, our farmers, ranchers and agri-business owners are facing some criti-

cal challenges. These include: vertical integration, consumer preference shifts, government intervention, global production, disease, water shortages and skyrocketing costs.

There are also opportunities. Global population is expanding and opening new markets for U.S. production, e-commerce offers new purchasing and marketing options, production technology continues to improve and we are experiencing only the dawn of genetic modification.

As the closing paragraph of the FFA Creed states, "I believe that rural America can and will hold true to the best traditions in our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task." God bless you men and women who feed America.

Don Taylor is the co-author of "Up Against the Wal-Mart's." You may write to him in care of "Minding Your Own Business," PO Box 67, Amarillo, TX 79105. Column sponsored by Goodland Area Chamber of Commerce Business Development Committee.

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from our readers

• to the editor

communist lie (there is no need of God), they have no hope, no faith! "But without faith, it is impossible to please him, for he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and that he is a reward of them that diligently seek Him," Heb. 11:6

Frank Sowers, Benkelman, Neb.