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Media: Networks taking steps to avoid a repeat of 2000 fiasco

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The TV networks say that they won't jump the gun this time and that they'll get it right.

They'll be helped on election night by an outside consortium of expert researchers, a new and enlarged set of polls and computers, tabulators in every U.S. county, beefed-up network analyst teams, stringent standards for declaring winners, University of Pennsylvania students stationed at the National Constitution Center - and the Rockefeller Center skating rink.

"Foolproof? Never," said Warren Mitofsky, who helped develop the first election exit poll, in Kentucky in 1967. "The system is extremely safe, but nothing that relies on the analysis of people is absolute."

Mitofsky and Joe Lenski oversee the National Election Pool, a group formed in 2003 to replace the Voter News Service, whose ineptitude in the previous presidential election contributed to one of the most serious TV news failures in history.

Before the polls had closed in northwestern Florida, the networks said Al Gore had taken the state. Then, in the wee hours, they gave it to George W. Bush, and, finally, just before dawn, they figured out that nobody had won the state, or the election.

Congress convened an investigation into the reporting disaster.

Network officials blamed the problems on faulty exit-poll data, outdated computer models, and underestimated absentee votes, all provided by the now-defunct Voter News.

"It left a mark on everybody," said Linda Mason, vice president of public affairs at CBS News. "The presidents of the networks had to testify on Capitol Hill. That's not something we like to do."

Now, CBS, the Associated Press, ABC, CNN, Fox News Channel, and all of the NBC TV news outlets have turned the election night system - which used to feature headlong competition to be first with the winners - upside down.

"Most of us don't want to be first," said David Bohrman, CNN's Washington bureau chief, who will oversee coverage on the cable network. "You don't necessarily want to be last, but the last thing you want to do is explain why you had to make a retraction," he added. "Caution will rule the day."

At NBC and Fox News, people who decide when to make the calls won't even know what other networks are doing.

The National Election Pool has assembled a group of 12 experts who will be stationed amid a bank of phones and computers in central New Jersey, constantly analyzing data and feeding it to the networks.

Lenski and Mitofsky will decide when and how to call each state and will relay their recommendations to the news operations.

Each news outlet, however, will have the final say in what gets printed or televised.

Some of the networks have set inviolate standards.

Dan Merkle, director of ABC News' decision desk, said his network will require at least a 1 percentage-point difference in vote totals before a projection is made. AP is requiring a 2-point margin.

All networks have agreed, for the first time, not to declare a winner in any state until all polls are closed there. None,

however, has ruled out the possibility of projecting a national election winner before voting ends in the Pacific time zone, though nobody expects that to happen.

"I don't think we'll have a presidential call by 11," Bohrman said, "But will we have one by 5 or 6 in the morning? I just don't have a sense."

"If an election is too close to call, even if we're at the end of the night and have 100 percent of precincts in, we won't call it," said NBC News vice president Bill Wheatley.

Representatives of all of the networks said on-air personnel would pay special attention to how they characterize their projections.

"If there's a very close state, and it looks like there will be a recount," Wheatley said, "we would say, 'appears to have won.'"

All of the networks say they'll have better, more carefully designed graphics.

Augmenting Tim Russert's handheld, play-by-play grease board, NBC News has built an elaborate glass palace at its Rockefeller Center control center, where it plans to use the famous New York City skating rink as a giant jigsaw map, with workers lugging cutouts of each state - red for Bush, blue for John Kerry - into place, as winners are projected.

"I think it will take three people to carry Texas," Mark Lukasiewicz, executive producer of election-night coverage, told the AP.

NBC has built an outdoor anchor booth for Russert and anchor Tom Brokaw. MSNBC, CNBC and Telemundo will have separate booths.

CNN will telecast from the Nasdaq stock-market site in Times Square, which has about 100 big screens for projecting data.

More than any network, CBS must be cautious.

"We're under an incredible spotlight because of the Bush memos," Mason said, referring to *60 Minutes'* use of questionable documents that criticized Bush's Air National Guard service. "If there's any doubt, we will not go."

The networks have also made organizational changes to try to ensure accuracy.

CNN has transferred political director Tom Hannon from its control room to its analysis center, and pressed senior legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin and others into duty to monitor legal challenges to the voting process.

CBS has moved its decision desk from the third floor to the first-floor newsroom. ABC has instituted an "oversight desk" - Merkle (who has a doctorate in public-opinion and survey methodology) with two other social-science Ph.Ds - to vet every election call.

It won't be all numbers on election night. All of the networks promise in-the-field reporting. CNN will station "go teams" strategically to get to secretary-of-state offices in places where there is controversy.

Marty Ryan, Fox News Channel executive producer of political programming, says his network would look closely at legal challenges, such as independent Ralph Nader's effort to get on the Pennsylvania ballot.

NBC will have a hotline that citizens can call to complain about perceived irregularities at the polls. Students from Penn's Fels Institute of Government will join more-experienced analysts at the National Constitution Center on Independence Mall to examine the volume, location and nature of the calls to identify fraud, intimidation, or other voting troubles.

Philadelphia was the cradle of democracy. Now it could be the protector.

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