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TELEVISION

Networks vow caution, not speed, in calling races

Embarrassed by their botched calls in the 2000 election, TV networks made some changes in how they project winners. **Step 1: Take a big dose of humility.**

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Brew lots of coffee on election night: It might be a late one.

TV networks, still cringing at the memory of all their flip-flops in 2000, say they'll be much slower to project a presidential winner in this year's tight race.

"I can promise you it's going to be a very exciting night, and a very *lonnnng* one," says Linda Mason, who will oversee CBS' election projections.

After all five network news teams had to reverse themselves not once but twice in 2000, the mantra at every network these days is ``better to be right than to be first."

Says CNN Washington Bureau chief David Bohrman: ``In the past, there has been something of a lemming effect, with networks racing to be the first one to call a race, sometimes racing right off a cliff. I don't think there will be much of a lemming effect this time."

The networks' new-found caution will be reinforced by electoral experiments -- including liberalized use of absentee ballots, provisional voting and voting by mail -- that could alter traditional turnout patterns and complicate the science of exit polling, a key element of computer projections.

"If a state goes 55-to-45 for a candidate, none of that stuff will matter," says Marty Ryan, who runs political coverage at Fox News. ``But in a state decided by a few hundred votes, like Florida was last time, it can make a huge difference."

COMPUTER-DEPENDENT

Networks have been using computers to project election winners for five decades, and the 2000 race was hardly the first time they've been wrong: In 1966 alone, ABC blew calls in five gubernatorial races and one U.S. Senate contest. Nor was the 2000 race between George W. Bush and Al Gore the first time an errant computer picked the wrong president: Early on election night in 1960, CBS proclaimed a landslide victory for Richard Nixon over John F. Kennedy, a mistake it corrected an hour later.

But the roller-coaster nature of the wrong calls in 2000, exacerbated by the breezy self-assuredness with which they were delivered (CBS' Dan Rather, proclaiming Gore's faux victory in Florida: "If we say somebody's carried a state, you can pretty much take it to the bank.") triggered a widespread public anger that left scars on the networks.

Congress held hearings. Polls taken by CNN and the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press showed 80 percent of Americans thought the networks should stop doing projections. The networks themselves all launched lengthy internal investigations.

"There was a huge sense of embarrassment and regret, and a search for what happened that continued for months and even years afterward," says Kathleen Frankovic, head of the CBS News polling unit, which makes most of the network's projection calls. ``It was humiliating, it was embarrassing, it was horrible, but it was also a learning experience."

The networks' ultimate conclusion was that just about everything that could have gone wrong in 2000, did.

The most serious mistake was basing their computer models for Florida elections on 1998 instead of a presidential

election year, which produces different voting patterns.

But there also were errors in exit polling, underestimates in the number of absentee ballots and several mistakes in tabulating the votes. (A Volusia County voting machine that went berserk and proclaimed the Socialist Workers Party candidate the county's victor did not help.)

Ultimately, the networks abolished the Voter News Service, the consortium that conducted exit polls and compiled vote totals for them. Instead, exit polling will be in the hands of two veteran polling companies -- **Mitofsky International and Edison Media Research** -- and vote counts will come from The Associated Press.

"It's a brand-new system, and we're confident it works," says Fox's Ryan. ``We had a chance to try it out eight, 10, 12 times during the primaries earlier this year and to tweak it under battleground conditions, and it worked very well."

But no system can erase what some network veterans say is the underlying cause of bad election calls: competitive pressure to be first.

"Nobody should have been surprised at what happened in 2000," says Martin Plissner, a former chief of political news at CBS and author of *The Control Room: How Television Calls The Shots in Presidential Elections*. ``The competitiveness that had developed in the 1990s over making the first call of an election had gotten to the point where huge risks were being taken."

In 1952, when the networks began using computers to project winners -- CBS used IBM's massive new Univac machine, and NBC had something called Mike Mono-Robot -- they were considered toys rather than serious analytical tools. "You had Ed Murrow and [Chet] Huntley and [David] Brinkley and Walter Cronkite introduce these computers with a bit of a chuckle," recalls Plissner. ``There was no suggestion that NBC or CBS were standing behind this. It was just sort of an amusing thing."

THE TECHNOLOGY RACE

But the importance of projections quickly grew, and so did the temperature of the bad blood between the networks. By 1962, CBS producer Don Hewitt was standing in his control room, jeering at a monitor showing NBC's Brinkley wincing as CBS made the first call of the California gubernatorial race.

"Wry that, you son of a bitch!" sneered Hewitt at the famously dry-witted Brinkley.

The result was a polling-and-computer-programming arms race that escalated to the point where the networks were spending \$20 million an election by 1989. Cooler fiscal heads called for a truce, and in 1989 the networks formed the consortium that would eventually become VNS, pooling costs and data. The projections completed by VNS were announced to all networks simultaneously.

But in 1994, ABC's analysts, examining the VNS data as it came in, jumped the gun and did their own projections, scoring scoops on the gubernatorial defeats of Mario Cuomo in New York and Jeb Bush in Florida. That touched off another arms race, but this time the cost ultimately would be measured in credibility rather than dollars.

"With everybody getting their data from the same place, the only way CBS could beat ABC or ABC beat one of the others was to call a race earlier, when the risk of making a bad call was higher," Plissner says. ``Do that often enough and the law of averages will catch up with you. And in 2000, the law of averages caught up to all of them in the worst possible place. It caught up to them in Florida, twice in one night."

Plissner believes the networks will proceed more humbly -- and slowly -- this time around: "The 2000 election put the fear of God in them." His words are echoed by nearly all the network honchos, who say that if this election is as close as 2000's, they won't try to call it. "If it winds up being a 400-vote victory," says Dan Merkle, who runs ABC's projections, ``our models are just not precise enough to predict that."