



PalmBeachPost.com

 PRINT THIS

Gun-shy TV anchors to use glitzy data blitz

By [Mark Schwed](#)
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Monday, November 01, 2004

With Election Day just hours away, this much is clear: In spite of endless polling and punditry, no one has the foggiest idea who is going to be the next president.

"If you try to predict this thing, you're a moron," says CBS News correspondent Jim Axelrod. "There's no way you can tell."

More Politics Coverage



Get S. Fla., national election [news, analysis](#) and more.

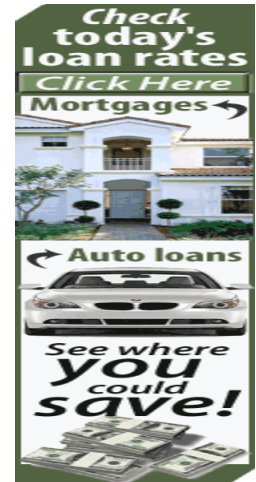
- [Local voter's guide](#)
- [Presidential candidates](#)
- [Vote in polls](#)
- [More national coverage](#)

Which is why networks expect more Americans to tune in to television for election coverage than ever before.

And what viewers see will be markedly different from four years ago, when the networks committed the mother of all mistakes by declaring Al Gore the winner, then George W. Bush, then no one.

At the time, NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw told viewers, "I not only have egg on my face, I have an entire omelet all over my suit."

This time, Brokaw, Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, Jim Lehrer, Wolf Blitzer and Brit Hume say they're not going to screw up. Slow and steady is the name of the game.



"We're going to be very gun-shy," says Blitzer, who will anchor CNN's election coverage from Times Square's Nasdaq MarketSite. "We'd much rather be second or third than wrong."

All of which could make for a very long night.

Expect cable to go wall-to-wall with election coverage beginning today. But the real deal begins after the evening newscasts at 7 p.m. Tuesday, as polls begin closing in the east and the broadcast networks go live. PBS begins its coverage at 10 p.m.

The networks and cable news outlets will have the usual raw vote totals and exit polls, but the system for gathering that information has been changed. The five networks and the Associated Press dissolved the Voter News Service used in 2000 and 2002 and hired [Edison Media Research](#) and Mitofsky International to handle exit polling, turning over actual vote counting to the AP.

TV screens will sparkle with gee-whiz graphics, such as CNN's 96-video tower lighting up Times Square. But the splashy technology has a simple purpose: to show viewers more data than ever before.

In 2000, NBC's Tim Russert had his markers and tote board. This year, Dan Rather will use a computer screen to get instant vote totals that viewers see on a large video monitor. Fox and ABC also promise splashy new looks.

But when the time comes to declare who will win the White House, the TV news stars promise to err on the side of caution.

CBS says it won't even use the word "declare" when calling the race. "We're not the ones to *declare* a winner," explains Marcy McGinnis, senior vice president of news coverage at CBS. "The states do that. What we want to say is we are *estimating* that this will be the winner. We're just getting very particular with our language."

The best-case scenario calls for a clean and smooth election, culminating with a clear-cut winner as early as 9 p.m.

"I'm hoping Tuesday night ends Tuesday," Axelrod says.

The nightmare scenario envisions not one but five Floridas that are all too close to call, leaving the nation without a clear winner for days, even weeks.

How will the night play out? Even here the networks differ.

"The story Tuesday comes down to Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania," Axelrod says. "Florida is the center of the deal, the bull's-eye."

CBS' McGinnis says that, although Florida is important because of its 27 electoral votes, "there's a lot of talk that Wisconsin or Ohio might be the Florida of this year — all depending on what Pennsylvania does."

Thom Bird, executive producer of Fox news specials, identifies 11 states that "could go either way."

CNN's Blitzer sees 10 or 12 states that are too close to call, but says, "You know what? Arkansas seems to be in play. New Jersey and Hawaii seem to be in play. That number (of swing states) could go up to 20."

Hardball host Chris Matthews, who will anchor coverage for MSNBC, believes Democrat John Kerry has wrapped up the North, Bush has locked in the South, with the only question mark being the Midwest.

"It's as traditional as any election we've had since 1860," he says.

Most political analysts agree that President Bush will take the early lead.

"The earlier states are generally the Republican states," says CBS' McGinnis. "If you tune in at 7 or 8, you might think it looks like Bush is running away with it," she says.

Fox News Sunday host Chris Wallace, who'll be focused on exit polling election night, breaks it down this way:

At 7 p.m., five states — Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, South Carolina and Virginia — should go to Bush, while Kerry takes Vermont. "If there's any change from that, that'll be the first tell-tale sign," he says.

At 7:30 p.m., Ohio and West Virginia close. "Whoever wins Ohio is the odds-on favorite to win the presidency," he says.

At 8 p.m., there's the "big casino": Florida, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. "If New Jersey, traditionally a Democratic state, goes red (for Bush), the night's over," Wallace says. "Bush can't afford to lose Florida. Kerry can't afford to lose Pennsylvania."

Of course, the poll closing times mean nothing if the vote count is slow or too close to call.

Long before such states are decided, networks may have an idea who's going to win by focusing on non-presidential races.

MSNBC's Matthews will be keeping a close watch on Kentucky's Senate race. "If (Republican) Jim Bunning loses, that says Kerry is in good shape."

His favorite bellwether state is Wisconsin. "If the president wins Wisconsin, that means he'll already have won Iowa. If he loses, that means Kerry has strength in the Midwest."

He predicts that "the mystery will be gone" early in the evening. "I don't see how we're not going to know whether the president has won or not by 9 p.m.," he says.

Wallace believes the race "will be decided on the ground game, the get-out-the-vote efforts of both campaigns."

But turnout also could depend on something as simple and unpredictable as a snowstorm in Ohio or rain in Pennsylvania.

"If necessary, we'll do it the old-fashioned way," says CNN's Blitzer. "We'll actually wait until they count the ballots before we declare the winner."

Find this article at:

http://www.palmbeachpost.com/politics/content/news/epaper/2004/11/01/m1a_election_coverage_1101.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

