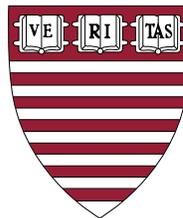


Diminishing Returns:
A Comparison of the 1968 and 2000
Election Night Broadcasts

Thomas E. Patterson

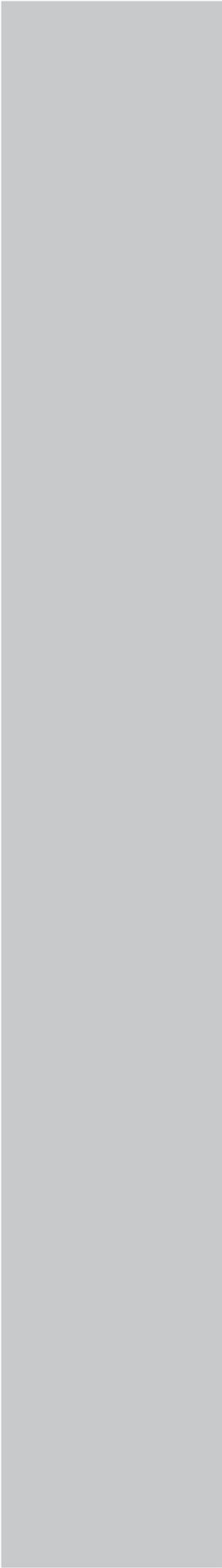
Joan Shorenstein Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government



Diminishing Returns:

*A Comparison of the 1968 and
2000 Election Night Broadcasts*

Thomas E. Patterson
Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press

December 2003

Research sponsored by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
www.shorensteincenter.org

Diminishing Returns:

A Comparison of the 1968 and 2000 Election Night Broadcasts

Shortly before 8 P.M., the television networks projected Al Gore as the winner of the Florida vote. Two hours later, they retracted the call. Then, just after 2 A.M., the networks claimed George W. Bush had won in Florida and was thereby the president-elect. Upon hearing this news, Gore called Bush to concede defeat. Meanwhile, the networks were trying to get statements from the candidates. “We haven’t heard yet from either Al Gore or the triumphant Governor Bush,” said CBS’s Dan Rather. “We do expect to hear from them in the forthcoming minutes.” Forty-five minutes later, the networks reported that Gore’s concession had been withdrawn. “Nobody knows for a fact who has won Florida,” Rather told his audience. At 4 A.M., the networks retracted the claim that Bush had won the Florida vote.¹

The networks’ performance—“We don’t just have egg on our face, we have an omelet all over our suits,” said NBC’s Tom Brokaw—contributed to the post-election confusion. It also renewed the longstanding complaint that the networks’ exit-poll projections dampen turnout in states where the polls are still open. The networks’ first projections aired in 1964, and Republicans complained loudly when Lyndon Johnson was declared the winner shortly after 9 P.M. EST. However, the GOP’s response was mild compared with how Democrats reacted in 1980 when, shortly after 8 P.M. EST, nearly three hours before West Coast polls had closed, the networks declared Reagan the winner. Democrats claimed the early call led to a falloff in turnout on the West Coast that cost them at least two House seats and perhaps a Senate seat or two.

However, exit-poll projections are a bigger threat to broadcasters’ reputations than to the integrity of elections. There is no firm evidence to support the claim that network projections influence voter participation in any systematic way.² Although scholars are divided in their opinions, nearly all agree that the impact of exit polls is small. Some scholars have concluded that exit polls might even boost turnout slightly in a close election. The 1980 presidential election is the one instance when West Coast

turnout clearly sagged after the networks named a winner. However, the culprit in this case appears to have been a presidential candidate. Inexplicably, Jimmy Carter went on the air to concede the election a full two hours before polls had closed on the West Coast.³

Should broadcasters be more responsible in their use of exit polls? Of course, they should. Often, the misuse of exit polls has stemmed from the rush to declare a winner. No network wants to withhold a call that others have made and every network likes to boast “you heard it here first.” After NBC called Florida for Gore an hour after the first of the state’s polls had closed, the other networks felt pressured to duplicate the call.

This type of pressure, however, is largely self-generated. Viewers apparently could not care less whether ABC, CBS, or NBC makes the first call. There is also no indication that viewers punish a network for withholding a call. In the words of the blue-ribbon team that evaluated CNN’s use of exit polls in 2000, “early calls serve no particular public or journalistic purpose.”⁴ If broadcasters would exercise a bit more restraint and would show a healthier respect for the statistical error inherent in polling, much of the controversy surrounding exit-poll projections might disappear.

Analysts might then find time to study other features of Election Night broadcasts. Unlike the debate and convention broadcasts, those on Election Night have received little scrutiny apart from their use of exit polls.⁵ Scholars have paid so little attention to these broadcasts that entire books have been written on the networks’ presidential campaign coverage without so much as even a footnote about the Election Night broadcasts. Yet, these broadcasts are an undeniably important part of our public life. They mark the end of the campaign and the start of the transition toward new leaders and policies. Election Night is one of those increasingly rare moments when an uncommonly large number of citizens eagerly gather in front of their television sets to hear about politics.

What information do these broadcasts provide to the public? What and who do they emphasize, and

what interpretations of the election do they offer? In a preliminary effort to answer such questions, this paper will compare and contrast the 7:00–11:00 P.M. (EST) coverage of the 1968 and 2000 Election Night broadcasts. These broadcasts were selected for analysis in part because journalists each time faced nearly the same challenge. Each election was decided by a razor-thin margin. Each time, Americans turned off their television sets and went to bed without knowing for sure who their next president would be.

Yet, broadcast television was itself a quite different enterprise in 2000 than it had been in 1968. The 1968 election took place in a period when exit polls and remote feeds were in their infancy and when the broadcast networks had a monopoly on the viewing audience. By 2000, broadcast equipment was highly mobile, exit polling had been advanced, and broadcasters were competing with cable outlets for viewers' attention.

THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The analysis in this paper is based on the broadcast "segment"—the continuous portion of an Election Night broadcast in which the same general topic is discussed. In most cases, a broadcast segment began with a verbal signal from the network anchor (for example, "We turn now to . . ."). A brief digression from the main topic of a segment was not considered to mark a new segment. By this definition, a total of 870 segments were identified in the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts.

Each segment was coded to identify such things as its main and secondary topics, the people and graphic material it featured, and the style of reporting it employed. These measures revealed few differences either in 1968 or in 2000 between ABC, CBS, and NBC. Accordingly, the three networks are lumped together in the analysis that follows. The illustrative examples used in the paper should be seen in the same light. Although the examples identify particular networks and journalists, they were chosen in each case because they represent general tendencies.

The broadcast segments in 1968 and 2000 were nearly equal in length—68 seconds on average in 1968 and 72 seconds on average in 2000. The variation in segment length was also nearly identical in 2000 to what it had been in 1968. Thus, differences between the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts would not appear to be an artifact of segment length.

VOTES AND PROJECTIONS

In the era before exit polling, broadcasters went on the air on Election Night before they had results to report. They used their opening minutes to prepare the audience for the evening ahead. They reviewed the campaign and speculated on the outcome of key races. Only when vote returns started to come in from the states did the networks begin to base their judgments on actual numbers.

Even in this early period, the networks were not fully content to let the actual returns speak for themselves. They developed a primitive computer model that predicted the national two-party vote on the basis of selected local returns furnished by the wire services. The model accurately predicted the 1952 and 1956 elections, but, given the size of Dwight Eisenhower's victories, this was hardly an extraordinary feat. In 1960, the model led the networks to announce early in the evening that Richard Nixon appeared to be the likely winner, an embarrassment that contributed to their decision in 1964 to rely on exit polls.⁶

Returns vs. Results. Although the 1968 Election Night broadcasts were the second ones to use exit polls, they bore a resemblance to previous broadcasts. For one thing, they opened with general commentary. CBS anchor Walter Cronkite began his network's broadcast with a quick review of a few early returns and then turned to the commentator Eric Sevareid and the author Theodore H. White for their observations on the campaign. They exchanged views on the past and the future of America's political parties, with Sevareid evoking the scholar Clinton Rossiter's theory of third parties, while White speculated on the impact of George Wallace's and Spiro Agnew's candidacies on the border states.

The 1968 broadcasts also made extensive use of actual vote returns. A full third of the results reported in 1968 were based on actual returns, as opposed to exit-poll projections. In fact, actual returns were the featured display as, throughout the evening, the networks turned to big boards that showed the running national vote totals in the presidential race.

In contrast, CBS began its 2000 Election Night broadcast by diving straight into the numbers. In his opening words, Dan Rather said:

Bush gets South Carolina, Gore gets Vermont—part of our CBS News Election Night headlines of the

hour. Bush picks up his first state in the South; Gore gets his first win in New England. But no call yet in what both campaigns say may be the key to this election—Florida. It’s 7 P.M. in the East, and this [ELECTORAL VOTE TOTALS ON SCREEN] is how the all-important electoral vote count shapes up at this moment; 270 needed to be elected. Remember it’s still very early. And this is the national popular vote count at this hour. Florida could turn out to be the decisive battleground state tonight. The polls just closed in six states with sixty-six electoral votes, including Florida’s big 25. Let’s look them over. South Carolina, the palmetto state, was expected to send its eight electoral votes for George Bush and it has done so. Bush wins South Carolina. Vermont, up in the green mountain state, three electoral votes dropped there for Al Gore, his first electoral votes of the night.

From there, Rather went on to more numbers, and throughout the opening stage of the broadcast, he and his CBS colleagues rarely strayed very far, or for very long, from the reporting of election results.

Though the 2000 broadcasts got to the vote more quickly, the Election Night broadcasts in both 1968 and 2000 were dominated by coverage of election results. Upwards of 85 percent of the segments each year dealt wholly or in significant part with vote results. Expectedly, the overriding story on Election Night is a story of victory and defeat.

However, the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts did differ substantially in the source of their voting numbers. Actual vote returns, which accounted for a third of the 1968 figures, were nearly a footnote in 2000. More than 95 percent of the numbers shown to viewers in 2000 were based on exit polls. During the first two hours of the 2000 broadcasts, almost no real vote counts were presented.

So complete was the networks’ reliance on exit polls in 2000 that broadcasters failed at times to tell viewers the basis of what they were seeing. Virtually every presentation of exit-poll results in 1968 included a reminder that the numbers were projections rather than actual returns. In 2000, a fifth of the exit-poll projections were presented without an advisory statement. Moreover, many of the advisories did not extend beyond phrases such as “we project the winner to be . . .” Viewers were seldom told in full and clear terms that statistical models and exit-poll samples were the basis for the reports.

Presidency vs. Congress. In both 1968 and 2000, the presidential race dominated the coverage. Nevertheless, the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts differed in the amount of attention the presidential contest received (see Table 1). It was featured in 81 percent of the 2000 segments as opposed to 70 percent of the 1968 segments. Congressional races received less attention in 2000 than they had in 1968, despite the fact that majority control of Congress was at issue in 2000, whereas the Democrats were virtually assured of retaining control in 1968. Segments that focused on Senate races fell from 18 percent in 1968 to 15 percent in 2000 while those directed at House races declined from 3 percent to 2 percent. Other races, mainly those for governor, slipped from 8 percent of the segments in 1968 to 2 percent in 2000.

Table 1. Playing Up the Presidency

In comparison with 1968, the presidential race received more attention in 2000

Race for the:	1968	2000
Presidency	69.5%	80.7%
Senate	17.5	14.5
House	3.1	2.4
Presidency & Congress	2.0	0.7
Other Offices	7.9	1.7
Total	100%	100%

In this respect, the Election Night broadcasts are part of a more general trend in news. Until 1963, when the television networks launched their 30-minute national newscasts, daily coverage of America’s elected institutions was split evenly between news about Congress and news about the presidency. The networks, however, had a preference for presidential news. The presidency, a truly national office that is embodied in a single individual, was a natural fit for the networks because of their national audience and their tendency to tell the news through the actions of individuals rather than institutions. By the 1970s, the presidency was getting substantially more coverage on the evening newscasts than was Congress.⁷ Since then, except for brief periods, such as Newt Gingrich’s first few months as House Speaker, television news has concentrated most of its attention on the presidency.

THE MODERNIST INFLUENCE

The sociologist Kiku Adatto notes that television news has been shaped by a modernist influence.

“The very idea of news, especially the visual, fast-paced, episodic style of television news, is inconceivable without the culture of modernism,” Adatto says. “For modernism, in contrast to the cultural movements that preceded it, prizes novelty and speed as values in themselves.”⁸

Modernist values did not instantly change the form of television news. Roughly three decades went by after the first 30-minute newscasts in 1963 before the fast-paced formula of today was firmly in place. The average sound bite on the evening news was more than 40 seconds in the 1960s and exceeded 20 seconds in 1980. Not until the 1990s did it fall below 10 seconds, where it remains.

Long vs. Short. The sound bites on Election Night broadcasts have also shrunk. In 1968, many of the segments contained a lengthy statement by a single speaker. When CBS’s Walter Cronkite turned to Dan Rather for a rundown on the Midwest, Rather talked without interruption for the next 173 seconds:

Walter, in the Middle West, Hubert Humphrey, according to CBS News estimates, has won in Michigan and Minnesota. All the rest of the Midwest belongs, as expected, to Richard Nixon. No surprises anywhere so far tonight except that Illinois, Ohio, and Missouri are still out, and there’s every indication that they are very close.

First, let’s go to the board in Illinois. With 19 percent of the vote counted in Illinois, Hubert Humphrey leads Richard Nixon with George Wallace running third. Our CBS News estimates it’s simply too close at the moment to come out with anybody even leading in Illinois and that, in itself, is somewhat of a surprise. And, I might point out that Chicago, as usual, appears to be the key in this close race, this presidential race. And the CBS News analysis of returns from sample precincts shows that Humphrey, even though he is winning 6 out of every 10 Chicago votes, is running at a slower pace in Chicago than John Kennedy did in 1960. Now why is that important? Simply because Kennedy won Chicago by more than 450,000 votes in 1960 and managed to carry Illinois by less than 9,000 votes. And that, in the suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, Nixon is winning by about the same ratio as Humphrey is in Chicago. That could be important as the night goes along. Hubert Humphrey on the basis of our sample precincts is not running as well in Chicago as John Kennedy did in 1960. At this early stage, we can say that this

is just one indicator that Illinois may yet go Republican.

Now let’s look at Ohio, also with 26 electoral votes and with 36 percent of the vote counted in Ohio. Very close there. Nixon leading in Ohio, razor-thin margin over Humphrey. George Wallace, as expected, running well in Ohio. It was assumed before the polls closed that any votes that Wallace got in Ohio would be taking votes away from Hubert Humphrey. Again though, in Ohio, a substantial number of our CBS News sample precincts are in, and it’s simply too close for us to spot a trend, or indicate that anyone is even leading, and those are the two big electoral giants in our area, Illinois and Ohio, and nowhere is the see-saw nature of this race any more apparent than it is in those two big states.

Now, in Missouri, which has 12 electoral votes and is the only other state still not called as far as our CBS News estimates are concerned. This is the actual vote total [VOTE TOTALS PROJECTED ON SCREEN]. Humphrey leading in Missouri with 45 percent of the actual vote in. George Wallace running third and not running nearly as well in Missouri as many Wallace supporters had expected. Now, once again our CBS News sample precincts—and we have a good many of them in—but things are too close in Missouri to spot a trend or even call anyone leading.

And that’s the general picture in the Midwest, Walter, as far as the presidential race is concerned. Illinois and Ohio, the two important ones, are still out. And if we may add here in Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson has won the Wisconsin senatorial race, in South Dakota Ferrar has won the gubernatorial race there. Hearn has been elected in Missouri.

In 2000, such reports were rare. Although the 2000 segments, as indicated previously, were about the same length as the 1968 segments, they were split into more pieces, as exemplified by this ABC segment, which has 21 sound bites, most of which are less than 10 seconds in length:

Peter Jennings: Bring us up to date on what you’re thinking at the moment.

George Stephanopoulos: Getting a little easier to follow now.

Jennings: That’s true.

Stephanopoulos: Both candidates are in exactly the same situation now. It’s simple. Whoever wins Florida, only has to win one other state. Whoever

loses Florida has to run the table. That's the ballgame now.

Jennings: OK, so if Mr. Gore wins in Florida, he only has to win one of the other battleground states—Iowa or Wisconsin.

Stephanopoulos: Or Nevada or Oregon. Any one of the four gets him over 270 [electoral votes].

Jennings: And looking at it before the polls actually closed tonight, I don't think you would have wanted to take a guess at how those states would go, or even at this late date.

Stephanopoulos: Can't tell. I think it's very plausible that Gore can take Florida and Bush can run the table. Much more likely. I think it's—right, now it's—I would say that Florida is more of a must win for Gore than for Bush.

Jennings: And so Mr. Bush, in general terms, has slightly less of a struggle than Mr. Gore.

Stephanopoulos: Slightly less. But, boy, it's awfully hard to say.

Jennings: I quite agree. Mark Halperin, our political director, your thoughts on the same question.

Mark Halperin: Florida is the key. And it's been key in these two campaigns' minds for weeks. So they put in a fair fight. The winner of Florida would not have surprised the other gentleman. Some of the other states weren't quite as closely contested. Florida they both know would be important.

Jennings: And do you agree that Mr. Gore could win Florida and Mr. Bush could run the other states?

Halperin: Absolutely. If you look at those states, it's possible that Gore could end up winning Florida, but then lose in the others.

Jennings: Most of what we are getting now is anecdotal, incomplete, numerical information. At this point, any hints, any clues?

Halperin: Well, we've got the raw votes and we've got the confidence of both campaigns that when the final vote comes in they'll be the victor.

Jennings: What does the raw vote show anyway that catches your eye at all?

Halperin: Well, Governor Bush in the raw vote has a bit of a lead and the Gore campaign says that that will be overtaken here when the rest of the vote comes in.

Jennings: Because if you look at every state, as you have told me a hundred times, you have to divide it up into many, many pieces in order to understand where the real strengths are.

Halperin: There's going to be a small gap. No matter who wins Florida, the vote will be agonizingly close for both of these guys.

Jennings: Thank you, Mark Halperin and George Stephanopoulos. We're going to go now to . . .

Occasionally, presentations of this type brought out insights that might not have come out in the more structured presentations that typified the 1968 segments. Typically, however, the 2000 presentations merely skimmed the surface, as the participants jumped from one point to the next.

Looking back at the 1968 coverage, one is struck by just how much information was packed into a segment. To be sure, if the words had been put into a newspaper story, they would have filled no more than a couple of paragraphs. Nevertheless, the segments were efficient in the sense that few words were wasted. In contrast, many of the words spoken on the 2000 broadcasts served no purpose other than to ease the transition to the next speaker.

Anchors vs. Correspondents. The conversational style of the 2000 broadcasts brought the network anchors regularly into view. Peter Jennings spoke 11 times during his discussion of the Florida vote with Mark Halperin and George Stephanopoulos. Anchors were rarely out of the picture for long during the 2000 broadcasts. They were the primary source of information in 47 percent of the segments, the facilitator (as in the Jennings example) in 26 percent of the segments, and had an ancillary role in 16 percent. In only 1 percent of the segments was the anchor completely out of the picture or was on camera only for as long as it took to introduce the next speaker or topic.

In contrast, the anchor was out of the picture or an incidental part of 30 percent of the 1968 segments. In four of every five of these segments, correspondents virtually had the air to themselves, as illustrated by Dan Rather's report on the Midwestern states. Correspondents were also involved in more segments in 1968 than they were in 2000. They had a leading role in half of the 1968 segments, compared with only two in five segments in 2000. And rarely did a correspondent speak for longer than 30 seconds at a time in 2000. Nearly all

the lengthy sound bites in 2000 were delivered by the anchors.

Indeed, the larger presence of the anchors in the 2000 broadcasts, as compared with 1968 segments, came entirely at the expense of network correspondents (see Table 2). All other participants, including expert consultants and political figures, had as much or more airtime in 2000 as they had in 1968. Correspondents were the only speakers who were a smaller presence in 2000 than they had been in 1968.

Table 2. The Diminishing Role of the Network Correspondent

Anchor-centered, fast-paced broadcasting has reduced the correspondent's role even when he or she is part of a segment.

Correspondents' Speaking Role:	1968	2000
Solo or nearly solo	59.6%	1.1%
Primary but with anchor	35.1	36.4
Equal or secondary to anchor	5.4	62.5
Total	100%	100%

“Me” vs. “Them.” Anchors and correspondents alike were more self-referential in 2000 than they were in 1968. An aspect of modernism is the shrinking of distance, social as well as temporal.⁹ Proximity and intimacy are valued, which on television news has meant among other things, that journalists have found ways to work themselves into their stories. They are no longer mere reporters: they are “part of the message.”¹⁰

This conception was not a large part of television journalism in the 1960s, and self-referential statements were virtually nonexistent on the 1968 broadcasts. However, they were commonplace on the 2000 broadcasts. Shortly after Al Gore was declared the winner of the Florida vote, for example, NBC correspondent David Gregory reported:

Well Tom [Brokaw], you and I have talked about just how chilly the Thanksgiving meal might be between Governor Jeb Bush and Governor W. Bush. Well, ironically enough tonight, just a mile from where I stand at the Four Seasons Hotel, the Bush family was at just such a private dinner when the results came in from Florida. Certainly not good news. We know now that this family and all the Bush campaign is focusing very closely on Pennsylvania. In fact, the entire entourage has

moved from the Four Seasons Hotel back to the Governor's mansion. That's a change in plans. It's a fairly festive atmosphere at the hotel, but everybody knows in the top echelons of this campaign that there's a lot of watching to be done here in the course of very many hours. Pennsylvania, Tom, there's probably not any state that I've come to know more in the course of this campaign. I've probably memorized the siding of all the airport hangers throughout the state. Governor Bush has worked it hard, as has Governor Ridge. They're counting on that tonight, and also, as [correspondent] Tim Russert is doing, doing all of the math on some of the other combinations in terms of how they get to victory. They've been encouraged tonight and throughout the day, but gone is that sort of boundless confidence that we've seen in the past few days. As you've been talking about, it's been very tight.

The tendency of today's television journalists to conflate themselves and events is perhaps nothing more than a small conceit. Maybe it even draws viewers more fully into the material. Whether the material provides insights or information worthy of viewers' attention is an entirely different issue.

Good vs. Bad. The modernist influence has not affected the Election Night broadcasts in all respects. Lionel Trilling identified adversarial posturing as a hallmark of modernism.¹¹ This posturing is clearly evident in daily election coverage. In the 1960s, presidential candidates received mostly favorable press coverage. By the late 1980s, partly as a consequence of Vietnam and Watergate, their coverage was mostly unfavorable, and has remained so.¹² On evening newscasts during the 2000 general election campaign, George W. Bush's coverage was 63 percent negative while Al Gore's was 60 percent negative. A good deal of Bush's coverage suggested that he was not too smart. There were nine such claims on the evening news for every contrary claim. Gore's coverage was dotted with suggestions that he was not all that truthful. Such claims outpaced rebuttals by seventeen to one.¹³

But if journalists are quick to fault the candidates during the campaign, they bring a different perspective to the Election Night broadcasts. In both 1968 and 2000, journalists embraced the winners and the losers alike. The elections were described as “hard fought” and candidates were said to have earned “respect.” Aside from criticisms of George Wallace's 1968 campaign, the broadcasts

were nearly devoid of negative statements about the candidates. Although the effect of this posture on the Election Night audience has not been studied, it may help citizens to put aside some of the partisan divisions created by the campaign.

CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

Daily television news coverage changed markedly between 1968 and 2000. The 1960s were dominated by a descriptive style of journalism that for decades had characterized newspaper reporting. The journalist's task was to describe events, which often meant telling the audience what newsmakers had said and done.

The descriptive style, however, was poorly suited to television. Viewers did not have to be told what they could see with their own eyes. Moreover, the descriptive style seemed dull when the words were spoken to a viewing audience. The networks preferred a livelier, more story-like style of reporting. Reuven Frank, an executive producer of NBC's nightly news in the 1960s, told his correspondents: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end."¹⁴

An interpretative style of reporting that was explanatory as well as descriptive gradually emerged. Reporters found it difficult to develop a dramatic story line without engaging in synthesis and interpretation. Accordingly, television journalists began to think like analysts as well as reporters, telling their audiences not just the "what" of events but the "why." By the 1980s, interpretive reporting had displaced descriptive reporting as the dominant form of television journalism.

Reports v. Analyses. The change is evident in Election Night broadcasting, though less so than in daily television news. At peak moments on Election Night, broadcasters are hard pressed to do anything more than deliver straightforward accounts of the results. Nevertheless, interpretation and analysis were a larger part of the 2000 broadcasts than of the 1968 broadcasts. Of course, elementary forms of analysis crept into otherwise straightforward 1968 reports, as when CBS's Dan Rather compared Hubert Humphrey's showing in Illinois to John F. Kennedy's performance there eight years earlier. Typically, however, analysis in 1968 was set off from reporting and assigned to

designated commentators, such as CBS's Eric Sevareid. Only one in eight of the 1968 segments were analytical in nature. The rest were fully or primarily descriptive. In contrast, one in three of the 2000 segments were analytical in nature, and many of the others contained some analysis.

The greater frequency of analysis in 2000, however, did not translate into higher-quality analysis. The fast pace of the 2000 broadcasts meant that most of the analytical statements were too short to provide anything resembling insightful commentary. Take, for example, CBS correspondent Bob Schieffer's response to a graphic on the Florida Senate vote:

Well, look at this. About a third of the voters down there said using the surplus to take care and keep Social Security solvent was an important thing to them. And 60 percent of those people voted for the Democrat, Nelson. So that may tell you that Al Gore may have a bit of an edge in Florida. We'll have to wait and see what happens.

Superficial statements of this nature dotted the 2000 broadcasts. In the whole of these telecasts, there were only a handful of presentations where a trend or development was examined in substantial depth.

Strategy vs. Policy. In both 1968 and 2000, candidates' campaign strategies were the major focus of the analysis. However, because analytical content made up a larger share of the 2000 broadcasts, campaign strategy was also a larger theme of these broadcasts. Of the broadcast segments in which election results were discussed, nearly 40 percent in 2000, compared with less than 15 percent in 1968, included statements about campaign strategy.

In their Election Night analysis, journalists looked backward, toward the strategies the candidates had employed in the campaign, rather than forward, toward the policies the candidates promised to pursue if elected. Only 1 percent of the broadcast segments in 1968 and in 2000 focused on the election's policy consequences. Fewer than 5 percent contained even a passing reference to the election's policy implications.

EXIT-POLL JOURNALISM

Exit polls offer a means of discovering what voters are thinking when they cast their ballots. By itself, the ballot reveals only the decision that a voter

made. Exit polls collect this information while also gathering information about a respondent's personal background and political opinions.

Broadcasters in 1968 and 2000 used this feature of exit polls to help explain voters' decisions. The most striking feature of most of this analysis was its superficiality. Frequently, the correspondent did little more than summarize a set of numbers. During ABC's 2000 telecast, for example, Peter Jennings asked correspondent Lynn Sherr to analyze "what the demographics are showing us in Florida." As the breakdown of the male and female vote in Florida appeared on the screen, Sherr said:

Peter, we've been talking all year long about the gender gap. It is here again big time. The gender gap, as you know of course, is the difference between the-between the way men vote and women vote. Let's take a look at the numbers, and see what's happening here today. Let's start with the male vote: 59 of that-52 percent, excuse me-of that vote went to George Bush today-is going for Mr. Bush, only 42 percent for Mr. Gore. That's a difference of 10 points. Now let's take a look at the women's vote. Here we go. Just flip the numbers and you will see that Mr. Gore is getting 53 percent of the vote, Mr. Bush only 43 percent of the vote. That adds up to a 20-point gender gap. It could be the largest since we started tracking all of this back in 1980. And Peter, the reason is that men consistently want smaller government. Fewer women are so sure about it."

The quality of the exit poll analysis was somewhat higher in 1968 because the longer sound bites allowed for more substantial commentary. But in truth, even the 1968 exit-poll analysis was superficial in most cases. Seldom did correspondents say much beyond what the numbers themselves revealed. Perhaps network correspondents are inadequately trained in survey analysis or insufficiently practiced in the reporting of percentages and correlates. Whatever, rather than unleashing their reportorial skills, exit polls seem almost to suppress them.

Certainly, exit polls do lend a degree of precision to statements about voting patterns, as the following report from CBS's 2000 broadcast illustrates:

Anthony Mason: Dan, our exit polls show us today that 11 percent of the voters made up their minds in the last 3 days. And they swung to Gore, but by a narrow margin-as you can see, 48 to 44

percent. For many of those undecided voters, it was not an easy decision. When asked about the strength of their support, nearly three-quarters of those undecideds said they had reservations about the candidate they ultimately voted for. So they may have been reluctant, even tortured decisions, but they gave a narrow edge to Al Gore.

Nevertheless, exit poll analysis is about as lifeless as election reporting gets. Real people dissolve into faceless numbers and facile explanations. What's the difference between men and women voters? The answer is 20 percentage points. Why the difference? Because men want smaller government and women might not.

Remarkably, exit polls are not even the most revealing or interesting method of reporting election outcomes. Actual vote returns are superior in this respect. Voting patterns vary widely within a state, and the first returns from a state often diverge from later ones. Countless candidates have seen a lead shrink and then disappear entirely as the late returns come in. Except when the networks miss the call, exit polls hold out no such prospect. With one set of numbers, they yield a final verdict on what voters in a particular state or district decided. Given the other problems associated with exit polling, Congress would probably do the networks a favor if it carried through on its periodic threat to ban exit poll projections until all polls had closed.

THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Election Night broadcasting is not deeply flawed. It certainly fulfills the major interest of the viewing audience, which is to discover election outcomes. Nevertheless, the potential of these telecasts has not been fully realized. The broad changes that have taken place in television news since the 1960s are a hindrance. They have contributed to a form of broadcasting driven heavily by personality and pacing. The changes have been so gradual and are now so deeply ingrained that it may be difficult to reverse them. Yet, in an era where there are so few opportunities to communicate at length with the American public about politics, it would be a shame not to try to strengthen the Election Night broadcasts.

Places and Faces. Election Night broadcasting is less interesting than it could be. These broadcasts-with their live reporting from studio settings-have an old-fashioned look. Talking heads and graphic

displays dominated in 2000 as well as in 1968. Each time, they accounted for roughly 90 percent of what the viewers were presented. The graphics were slicker in 2000 than they were in 1968, but not much use was made in either year of television's capacity to tell a story with pictures. Only occasionally did the networks make use of pre-shot footage or remote cameras, even though they would have opened the broadcasts to a wider range of faces and voices.

Political leaders, for example, did not figure prominently on either the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts, speaking in only about 5 percent of the segments. They are featured on these telecasts only in the sense that, as the votes are being counted, their fates are being decided. Otherwise, they are bit players. By one indicator, they even shrank in significance in 2000 as compared with 1968. When a candidate's photograph appeared on screen in 1968, as it did in 6 percent of the segments, it filled the screen two thirds of the time. For example, as ABC's Tom Jarriell did a rundown of the statewide races in Arizona and Arkansas, full-screen photographs of Barry Goldwater and Winthrop Rockefeller popped up. Jarriell could be seen in a small insert in the lower right corner. In 2000, full-screen shots were reserved for reporters and anchors. The candidates were the small inserts. Although photographs of candidates were used six times more often in 2000 (37 percent of the segments had a candidate photograph), these photographs filled the screen in only 1 percent of the segments-four times less often than in 1968.

Voters are even less prominent on these broadcasts. Their votes may determine the outcomes, but citizens are represented largely through numbers and statistical relationships. At times, the public does not even seem to be on the minds of the network journalists. For example, in light of the persistent complaint that exit polls depress turnout, broadcasters might be expected to go out of their way to remind viewers to vote. Nevertheless, fewer than 5 percent of the segments broadcast during the hours when West Coast polls were still open contained even as much as a brief statement to that effect.

Exit Polls. Of course, it could be claimed that exit polls bring the voters more fully into Election Night broadcasts than was previously possible. As a result of exit polls, breakdowns of the vote by such variables as race, gender, and issue opinions are

now part of these broadcasts. In truth, however, these snapshots of the electorate are far less vivid—and in this sense, less real—than the portrayals conveyed in the traditional style of election reporting, as is evident from this 1968 example, in which CBS correspondent Mike Wallace dissects the Pennsylvania vote:

The Democrats said they would need a quarter of a million votes-250 thousand votes. They got a 263,000 vote plurality in the city of Philadelphia. That plurality made possible by a big turnout for Humphrey in the Negro and Jewish areas, with the Negro vote turnout higher than usual. The only weak spot was in the Italian areas, which might be sensitive to racial issues where Republicans did somewhat better than normal, and it is conceivable that that is what is making the difference in the race between the incumbent Democratic Senator Joseph Clark and Congressman Richard Schweiker, the Republican. Let's take a look at that Pennsylvania board. With one third of the vote now tabulated in Pennsylvania, Schweiker is leading with 792 thousand to 745 thousand for Clark.

Senator Clark has had his difficulty with the big Italian community in Pennsylvania. He has made over the period of the past two or three years disparaging remarks about other Democrats of Italian origin. And then, in addition, he was for gun control legislation that was a little stiffer than the gun control legislation that Schweiker was for in the state of Pennsylvania. And so one million sportsmen in western Pennsylvania particularly organized against Joseph Clark and it begins to look as though Schweiker may be going down-I mean Clark may be going down before Republican Richard Schweiker in spite of the fact that Humphrey now has taken the state of Pennsylvania and 29 big [electoral] votes and it looks like a big, big Democratic sweep throughout the eastern area.

It is ironic that, for all their emphasis on lively and colorful forms of reporting, the broadcast networks have embraced in exit polling a relatively drab way of talking about the electorate.

Correspondents. The networks should find ways to bring their seasoned correspondents more fully into their Election Night broadcasts. In today's fast-paced, anchor-centered broadcasts, correspondents are an underutilized resource. Their talent is largely

squandered in a world where they are confined to 10–20 second sound bites. As they spoke on the 2000 broadcasts, network correspondents seemed almost to be responding to an internal timer, knowing their remarks would have to be short, and therefore nondescript. Perhaps because of this, they did not display on the 2000 Election Night broadcasts the seasoned judgments they exhibited in 1968. The talent pool may no longer support the kind of journalism that enabled Walter Cronkite to sit in the center of the studio and turn alternately to Mike Wallace, Dan Rather, John Hart, Roger Mudd, and other CBS correspondents for detailed statements. More likely, though, correspondents in 2000 simply did not have the opportunity to display the knowledge they had acquired in the course of covering the campaign.

Unleashing their considerable talent would require the networks to lengthen their sound bites and downplay their anchors, who now carry too much of the reporting burden on Election Night. They are expected to be on top of virtually every aspect of the election, a division of labor that is unworkable if the content of these broadcasts is a top priority.

Topics and Emphasis. In the U.S. governing system, the executive and legislative branches are theoretically co-equal. A close evaluation of these branches' constitutional powers indicates, however, that they are not, in fact, equal. Congress actually has the larger powers. Yet, on Election Night, the presidency looms far larger than the Congress. It is doubtful that these quadrennial broadcasts contribute significantly to what the political scientist Hugh Heclo calls "the illusion of presidential government."

Nevertheless, there is no good reason why the congressional races should receive such short shrift on Election Night. Although local Election Night broadcasts provide some coverage of congressional elections, they do so from a local rather than a national perspective. The networks alone are positioned to inform the public about the Congress as a whole and its relationship to the presidency.

The storyline on election night is necessarily one of victory and defeat. But there is no reason why

this storyline

should be developed almost entirely within the context of campaign strategy. There are lots of other possibilities. Comparisons with previous elections are an obvious example. Lessons are nearly always learned from comparing the current election with previous ones. Yet, in both 1968 and 2000, fewer than 2 percent of the segments contained a historical reference worthy of note.

But the most glaring interpretive omission in the 1968 and 2000 broadcasts was the infrequency with which journalists stepped back from the election returns to ask: what does all of this mean for national policy? Fifty years ago, the Hutchins Commission on a Free and Responsible Press concluded that the news media's main shortcoming was its failure to place political developments in a context that would help citizens to understand their significance. The networks understandably have difficulty achieving this standard on their evening newscasts, which seek to cover the nation and the world in 30 minutes. Less understandable is the failure to achieve this standard on the Election Night broadcasts, which are hours long and devoted to a single subject.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Format

- Increase correspondents' role and cut back the anchors' role.
- Lengthen the sound bites.
- In explaining the vote, cut back the use of exit polls and rely more heavily on traditional reporting.
- Bring the voices and faces of candidates and voters more fully into the broadcasts.
- Increase the display of actual vote returns and decrease the display of exit-poll results.

Substance

- Cut back somewhat on the coverage of the presidential race and increase somewhat the coverage of congressional races.
- Cut back sharply on explanations based on campaign strategy and increase significantly the commentary on the political and policy implications of the election.

ENDNOTES

The author would like to thank Alison Kommer and Tami Buhr for their extraordinary contributions to this paper, which was written with support of a grant from the Knight Foundation. With painstaking precision, Alison Kommer conducted the content analysis that is the foundation of this paper. Tami Buhr assisted in that task, prepared the data for analysis, and did the computer analysis.

1. "CBS News Coverage of Election Night 2000: Investigation, Analysis, Recommendations," *CBS News* (January, 2001): 16–22.

2. See, for example, Douglas A. Fuchs, "Election-Day Radio-Television and Western Voting," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 30, 2 (1966): 226–236; Harold Mendelsohn, "Western Voting and Broadcasts of Results on Presidential Election Day," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 30, 2 (1966): 212–225; Seymour Sudman, "Do Exit Polls Influence Voting Behavior?" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 30, 3 (1986): 331–339; Michael W. Traugott, "The Impact of Media Polls on the Public," in Thomas E. Mann and Gary R. Orren, eds., *Media Polls in American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992): 125–149; and Sam Tuchman and Thomas E. Cronin, "The Influence of Election Night Television Broadcasts in a Close Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35, 3 (1971): 315–346.

3. See, for example, Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Scooping the Voters? The Consequences of the Networks' Early Call of the 1980 Presidential Race," *Journal of Politics* 46 (1984): 866–885; John E. Jackson, "Election Night Reporting and Voter Turnout," *American Journal of Political Science*, 27, 4 (1983): 615–635; and Raymond Wolfinger and Peter Linquti, "Tuning In and Turning Out," *Public Opinion*, 4 (1981): 56–60.

4. Joan Konner, James Risser, and Ben Wattenberg, "Television's Performance on Election Night 2000: A Report for CNN," unpublished report, January 29, 2001, p. 19.

5. Abraham McLaughlin, "After Election, 'Are Promises Kept?'" *Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 14, 2000, web download.

6. Martin Plissner, "Television and the Making of the President: Lessons for the Next Round." Public Lecture presented at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, March 6, 2001, p. 2.

7. See, for example, Richard Davis, "News Media Coverage of National Political Institutions," Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1986.

8. Kiku Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968 and 1988." The Joan Shorenstein Center, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Research Paper R-2, June 1990, p. 20.

9. Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy," p. 20.

10. Peter Boyle, *Who Killed CBS* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 141. Quoted in Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy," p. 21.

11. Cited in Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy," p. 20.

12. Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 20.

13. Robert Lichter, "A Plague on Both Parties: Substance and Fairness in TV Election News," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6, no. 6 (Summer 2001): 16.

14. Quoted in Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV* (New York: Sage Foundation, 1983), p. 226.

Appendix

Election Night Broadcast Code Categories

Note: Each of the 870 segments (defined on page 4 of paper) in the 1968 and 2000 Election Night broadcasts was coded according to each of the categories below. The resulting data are the basis for the observations in the paper.

Network:

1. ABC
2. CBS
3. NBC

Year:

1. 1968
2. 2000

Start time: ___ ___ ___

End time: ___ ___ ___

Focus (Major)

1. Presidential race
2. Senate race (s)
3. House race (s)
4. House & Senate
5. Pres/Congress
6. Other races

Subject (Major)

1. Winning/losing (who's ahead/who's behind)
2. Why someone is winning/losing (emphasis on candidate, e.g., candidate strategy)
3. Why someone is winning/losing (emphasis on voters/voting groups/opinions on issues)
4. Implications of winning-losing: political advantage (e.g., control of Senate)
5. Implications of winning-losing: policy consequences
6. Election hoopla (e.g., revelers at party/candidate headquarters)
7. Human interest (e.g., candidate waiting out election returns)
8. Other

Subject (Secondary but more than incidental)

1. Winning/losing (who's ahead/who's behind)
2. Why someone is winning/losing (emphasis on candidate, e.g., candidate strategy)
3. Why someone is winning/losing (emphasis on voters/voting groups/opinions on issues)
4. Implications of winning-losing: political advantage (e.g., control of Senate)

5. Implications of winning-losing: policy consequences
6. Election hoopla (e.g., revelers at party/candidate headquarters)
7. Human interest (e.g., candidate waiting out election returns)
8. Other

Empirical Basis for Judgment about Subject

(Major Source)

1. Exit polls/network estimates (vote preferences)
2. Exit polls/network estimates (opinion preferences/groups)
3. Actual vote returns (including partial returns but not estimates from sampling of partial returns)
4. Pre-Election Day polls
5. Historical data
6. Commentary
7. Other

Empirical Basis for Judgment about Subject

(Secondary source but more than incidental)

1. Exit polls/network estimates (vote preferences)
2. Exit polls/network estimates (opinion preferences/groups)
3. Actual vote returns (including partial returns but not estimates from sampling of partial returns)
4. Pre-Election Day polls
5. Historical data
6. Commentary
7. Other

Extent of Analytic Commentary

Does discussion of the numbers/data. . .

1. Stay confined to the numbers (including mathematical combinations using numbers from more than one state)
2. Go slightly beyond the numbers
3. Go significantly beyond the numbers (numbers serve only as a takeoff for extended commentary—e.g., going into the history of a state's voting pattern or explaining how the numbers suggest a major policy or demographic shift)

Nature of vote projections

(Code only if segment includes exit polls in the context of winning/losing statements. Not in context of demographic comparisons. Any noticeable reference to the contingent nature of the exit polls/sample precincts is sufficient for a code of “1.”)

1. Clear reference that results are based on estimates (e.g., “we estimate . . .”)
2. No mention of estimates (e.g., “___ wins”)

Anchor’s Role

1. Primary source of information
2. Facilitator (e.g., interacting with correspondent, conducting interview)
3. Incidental (e.g., simply introducing a correspondent)
4. Not part of segment

Leading Non-Anchor Participant(s)

[One entry-dominant category code. If several participants are in the same role, such as correspondents, treat them as one actor for purpose of determining “leading” participant. If correspondent is interviewing someone in the 2–8 categories, code the actor who is not the correspondent.]

1. Network correspondent
2. Expert, part of broadcast team
3. Outside expert
4. Candidate
5. Candidate family member/personal friend
6. Campaign Staff/Party Leader
7. Group representative
8. Person-in-the-Street

Other Non-Anchor Participant

[Same code as above; if correspondent is interviewing someone, this is where the correspondent should be coded]

1. Network correspondent
2. Expert, part of broadcast team
3. Outside expert
4. Candidate
5. Candidate family member/personal friend
6. Campaign Staff/Party Leader
7. Group representative
8. Person-in-the-Street

Setting

1. Studio
2. Studio (other than anchor studio)
3. Field
4. Studio and field (both should be a substantial part of segment. If anchor merely introduces a correspondent who is reporting from the field, it should be coded as field)

Graphic (Number of separate graphics) _____

*(FOR FIRST GRAPHIC ADDRESSED IN SEGMENT)
Was the analysis/commentary primarily in context of graphic(s) or did it go substantially beyond the information in the graphic?*

1. Simply described graphic
2. Supplied additional information to the graphic
3. Used graphic as a take off for a larger point

Photo

1. Yes (prominent)
2. Yes (but only as an icon)
3. No

Live Shot (outside anchor studio)

1. Yes
2. No

Pre-shot video footage

1. Yes
2. No

On-screen (dominance, in terms of what the viewer is seeing on the screen during the segment)

1. Mostly talking head(s)
2. Mostly visuals
3. About evenly talking heads and visuals

Was there a statement that the polls were still open and viewers should get out and vote?

1. Yes
2. No

The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

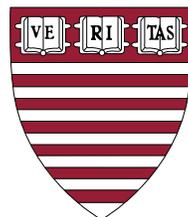


John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138



Telephone: (617) 495-8269
Fax: (617) 495-8696
<http://www.shorensteincenter.org>

Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government