IX. Uniform Poll Closing and Uniform Reporting

Uniform Poll Closing and Uniform Reporting

Task Force on the Federal Election System
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Summary of conclusions:

1. The effect of most early projections on voter turnout is small. In most cases, the early projections simply confirm what voters expected to happen. In some circumstances, however, the effect of projections may be large enough to influence outcomes further down the ticket. The effect is concentrated in the western region of the country.

2. Uniform poll hours, such as exist in Canada, would probably meet resistance from western states, where polls would have to close earlier than they now do, and from eastern states, where polls would have to open later than they now do. Resistance would arise partly from concerns about convenience for voters, and partly from potential difficulties in staffing polling places and conducting the count, which could range far into the night in the East.

3. A uniform *closing* would tend to restrict turnout opportunities for workers in blue collar occupations, who tend to vote Democratic. A uniform *opening* would restrict opportunities for white collar workers, who tend to vote Republican. Most voters so affected would find ways to vote at other times, but uniform poll times would probably have a greater effect on lower status and less educated citizens, who typically are less motivated to vote and therefore more sensitive to convenience.

4. Restrictions on the official reports of election outcomes could probably not prevent early projections absolutely, but they could raise the cost of a projection of a close election considerably. In closer races, exit pollsters could defeat restrictions on official reports by increasing the size of exit poll samples, by polling in more precincts, and as they already do by observing counts in precincts, which activity by law is open to public scrutiny in most states.

Every close election brings with it concerns about the effects of election projections from exit polls on voter turnout and election outcomes. The 2000 election certainly fit the pattern. On the basis of exit polls and early counts, several of the national networks called the state of Florida for Al Gore just before 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST), after the polls had closed in the Florida peninsula but a bit before they were to close in the panhandle. Shortly before 10 p.m. EST, with an hour left for the balloting on the West Coast, the networks withdrew their projections. Early the next morning, they called Florida, and by now the 2000 election, for George W. Bush, and only a couple hours later, they retracted their calls for a second time.

The broadcast media faced a barrage of criticism almost immediately. Media executives and exit poll analysts were called before a House panel, where they took stands that ranged from defiant to contrite.

Once again, a close election has put election projections in the spotlight. Once again, the issues are far from straightforward.

Evidence of effects of early calls on voter turnout

As most people recognize, it stands to reason that authoritative news that the election is decided might affect whether people turn out to vote. The rationale is not that people have lost the chance to influence the outcome. Even in a close election, the likelihood that an individual voter will change the outcome with his own single vote is vanishingly small. Rather, the concern is that people who wish to be part of an event will no longer care to participate in an election that is already in the history books. And the concern is that campaigns, parties, and advocacy groups will ease up in their efforts to bring people out to the polls.

For these reasons, early projections of election results are likely to depress voter turnout. But the magnitude of the effect is limited, for four reasons. First, early calls can only affect people who live in areas where the polls have not yet closed. Because nearly a majority of the American electorate resides in the Eastern time zone, and about a third resides in the Central, early calls can have an impact only on a subset of eligible voters. Second, early projections can only affect the turnout decisions of people who still intend to vote but who have not yet voted. Calls made 30 minutes before poll closing must necessarily have a smaller effect on turnout than calls made two hours before poll closing. Third, early projections can only affect the turnout decisions of people who were exposed to them. Voters who do not hear the early calls cannot be affected by them. Finally, early projections can only affect the turnout decisions of people whose intention to vote depended predominantly on a desire to participate in the presidential race. Some fraction of voters who have not already voted will turn out, despite the futility of affecting the presidential race, simply because they care a great deal about races that are further down the ticket.

Taken together, these four considerations imply that the effect of early projections on voter turnout will be modest in the context of the nation. Nevertheless, the effects on individuals who live to the west, who have not already voted, and who still intend to vote might be quite large. Even small decrements in turnout might be consequential in close races, and the depressing effects on turnout will be concentrated mostly in the states in the West.

The best study of the effect of early projections on voter turnout is based on an examination of the 1980 election. In November 1980, after a presidential campaign that was too close to call even the weekend before the election, one network made the first formal projection for Ronald Reagan very early, at 8:15 p.m. EST. Soon after, at 9:50 p.m. EST, President Carter appeared on national television to concede. At the time of the call, the polls remained open in most of the states in the Mountain and Pacific time zones, in many of the states in the Central zone, and even in a couple states in the Eastern zone. But informal forecasts of a substantial Republican victory began even earlier, with the opening of election night coverage at 6:00 p.m. EST, at which time the polls were still open throughout the nation. Critics of the networks' actions charged that the early calls of the presidential race had depressed voter turnout and caused the defeat of Democratic candidates, particularly in the West.

After the election, John E. Jackson of the University of Michigan secured funds to reinterview participants in the 1980 American National Election Study, a survey of a national sample of about 2000 persons. Jackson's follow-up survey asked the time respondents had voted, the election night news they had heard, and the time they had heard the news of a projected winner. The earlier survey had gathered a large amount of additional information, such as respondents' preferences in the presidential race. Each respondents' turnout was verified by an examination of official voting records.

Sizable numbers of voters in 1980 had been exposed to election night coverage before their polls had closed. Fourteen percent had heard about Carter's concession before the local polls had closed (29 percent more could not recall the time), and 26 percent had found out that Reagan had been projected the winner before the local balloting ended (30 percent could not recall the time). Overall, nearly half of the electorate, 49 percent, had been exposed to some kind of news about the election results, intimations if not projections, before their polls closed (17 percent could not recall the time).[1]

Having heard the election projections or Carter's concession did in fact depress turnout in 1980, and noticeably. In the West, the region most affected, the estimated turnout of those who had heard the projections and had not voted as of 6:00 p.m. EST (3:00 p.m. PST) was about 12 percentage points lower than the estimated turnout of those who had not heard the projections and had not yet voted. The impact on the total turnout, however, was much smaller, even in the West: not everybody heard tell of the projections before the polls closed, not everybody still intended to vote, and nearly half of the electorate had already cast ballots.[2] Though small in the aggregate, the effect was certainly large enough to have affected outcomes in close races further down the ticket.[3]

Jackson's study provides good evidence that early reports of election outcomes suppress turnout among those citizens who have heard the news, who intend to vote, and who have not yet voted. Given the special circumstances of the 1980 election, his estimates probably represent an upper bound on the effect that projections might have. The 1980 calls and concession were made much earlier than they have been made either before or since, meaning that larger numbers of intended voters might have been affected by them. Moreover, the 1980 projections were more informative than the projections either before or since, because the magnitude of Reagan's victory was simply not anticipated by the pre-election polls. In most elections, early calls only confirm what voters expected to happen already.[4] Accordingly, in most elections, early calls have even more limited effect on voter turnout.

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[1] These percentages are based upon self reports, which are sometimes mistaken, but they seem plausible. In 1980, about 14 percent of the voting age population resided in Pacific time zone, about 5 percent was in the Mountain zone, and 29 percent lived in the Central zone.

[2] Jackson does not break these out by region, so it is impossible to reconstruct the total effect on turnout across the population.

[3] Jackson also ventured some guarded conclusions about the differential effects of the early calls on the turnout of Republicans and Democrats. (None of the effects were sufficiently strong to have much confidence that they were not the result of sampling error.) He found that in fact the early projections lowered the likelihood of turnout more among Republicans than Democrats. Apparently, the information that the election was decided had more effect on the turnout of the winners than the losers. He also found that more Democrats than Republicans had yet to cast ballots at 6:00 p.m. EST. But because of their higher socioeconomic status, Republicans are more likely to turn out. Jackson does not indicate exactly how these three partisan differences play out, although he implies that the early projections probably hurt Republican turnout more than Democratic turnout.

[4] Of course, exit poll results and early vote tallies that vary from the pre-election polls produce surprise, and surprise is newsworthy. Consequently, competition to be first with the result of the election is even greater in elections that are closer than expected or in elections that are not as close as expected.

Effects of a nationwide poll closing time

One proposal often offered to solve the problem that early projections might depress turnout is a uniform nationwide poll closing time. For such a law to achieve its purposes, polls would need to stay open later in the East and close earlier in the West. Otherwise, reports from states that had closed earlier than the statutory closing hour—in the East, only New York and Rhode Island currently stay open until 9:00 p.m.—would be available before the polls close in the West.

If the closing time were established at 10:00 p.m. EST, the following table shows, polls in five western states with roughly 14 percent of the nation's population would need to close an hour earlier, at 7 p.m. PST or 8 p.m. MST, than they currently do.[5] Conversely, every state in the Eastern time zone and every state but one in the Central zone (Iowa) would need to keep its polls open longer, most by two to three hours. If, on the other hand, the closing time were set earlier, at 9 p.m. EST, every state in the Pacific time zone would have to shorten polling hours, and in the East only New York and Rhode Island would not have still to extend their hours.[6]

Uniform closing times and their effect on the states

	Affected states
Poll closing at 10:00 p.m. EST	
Later than current	
4 hours later	EST: IN (most), KY (most)
3 hours later	EST: FL (most), GA, NH (most), SC, VT, VA CST: IN (some), KY (some)
2 1/2 hours later	EST: NC, OH, WV
2 hours later	EST: AL, CT, DE, DC, FL (some), ME, MD, MA, MI (NH (some), NJ, PA, TN (part) CST: IL, KS (most), MS, MO, ND (most), OK, TX
1 1/2 hours later	CST: AR
1 hour later	EST: NY, RI CST: LA, MI (some), MN, NE, SD, TN (part), WI MST: AZ, CO, KS (some), NM, ND (some), WY
Earlier than current	
1 hour earlier	PST: CA, ID (some), OR (most), WA
Poll closing at 9:00 p.m. EST	
Later than current	
3 hours later	EST: IN (most), KY (most)
2 hours later	EST: FL (most), GA, NH (most), SC, VT, VA CST: IN (some), KY (some)
1 1/2 hours later	EST: NC, OH, WV
1 hours later	EST: AL, CT, DE, DC, FL (some), ME, MD, MA, MI (NH (some), NJ, PA, TN (part)

[5] All of the references to population percentages are approximations, although reasonably good approximations. Many states give discretion to local election jurisdictions to set polling times, and eleven states have parts in two time zones. In making the estimates, we allocated all of a state's population to the time zone with the largest share of its population.

[6] All of the analyses set aside the issue of polling times in Alaska and Hawaii, both two hours behind Pacific Standard Time.

	CST: IL, KS (most), MS, MO, ND (most), OK, TX
1/2 hour later	CST: AR
Earlier than current	
1 hour earlier	CST: IA MST: ID (most), MT, OR (some), UT PST: NV
2 hours earlier	PST: CA, ID (some), OR (most), WA

One obvious problem with such a proposal is that it would considerably extend the hours of operation of the polls in most of the Atlantic states and in many of the central states. If the states in the Eastern time zone wished to begin the balloting as early as they do currently, most would have to keep their precincts in operation for 15 hours, and after the closing count ballots well into the night. (Currently, only New York's largest counties operate their precincts for 15 hours. Connecticut, Iowa, Louisiana, and Rhode Island maintain 14 hours.) Uniform poll closing would in fact have the greatest effect not on the western states but on the eastern states. The states in the Eastern time zone, home to about 47 percent of the nation's population, would surely be concerned by the additional administrative costs of the extended precinct hours that would need be maintained.

A second option is suggested by Canada, the only other venerable democracy that spans several time zones. In Canada, both the times the polls open and the times the polls close are regulated nationally. The precincts in most of the country open at 9:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST) and close 12 hours later, at 9:30 p.m. EST. The polls open and close two and a half hours earlier in Newfoundland, two hours earlier in the other Maritimes, and a half hour later on the Pacific coast. The balloting begins as late as 9:30 a.m. local time in the Eastern zone and ends as early as 7:00 p.m. local in the Pacific zone. Because only 8 percent of Canada's population resides in the Maritimes, the vast majority of the balloting is begun and completed at approximately the same time nationwide.

The Canadian system of uniform opening and closing would solve the problem of extended hours in the East by opening the polls later in the Eastern and Central time zones. But it would raise its own set of issues. The least of the issues is the length of polling hours. Only a third of the U.S. population lives in states that allow 12 hours or less of polling time. A majority lives in states that allow no fewer than 13 hours. Hours could easily be extended by an additional hour, but either by pushing the balloting past 9 p.m. in the East or before 7 a.m. in the West.

The second issue is the polling period itself. The population of the United States is spread more evenly across the continent than the population of Canada. The two largest Canadian provinces, Quebec and Ontario, both predominantly in the Eastern time zone, contain 62 percent of Canada's population. The third largest province, British Columbia, has 13 percent. Only about 17 percent of the population lives in the Central and Mountain time zones. In the United States, in contrast, a much smaller proportion, only 47 percent, lives in the Eastern time zone and a slightly larger fraction, 14 percent, lives in the Pacific. In between, 33 percent lives in the Central zone. (See the table below.)

United States population, by time zone

Time zone	Percent of eligible citizen
Eastern	47.0
Central	32.9
Mountain	5.4
Pacific	14.1

Alaska and Hawaii	0.6

As a result, it is difficult to identify a polling period that would not cause some substantial dislocation from current practices in the states. As shown in the next two tables, later opening and closing times would cause the polls to open quite late for a large proportion of the eligible voters in the Eastern and Central zones. Conversely, earlier opening and closing times would require the polls to close quite early for a large proportion of eligible voters in the Pacific and Mountain time zones.[7]

Poll opening times, by state, in Eastern time

Typical or earliest openin	States	Percent of eligib citizens, 1996
6:00 a.m. EST	CT, IN (most), KY (most), ME (some), NY, VA	14.3
6:30 a.m. EST	NC, OH, WV	8.2
7:00 a.m. EST	DE, DC, FL (most), GA, IL, IN (some), KS (most), (some), LA, ME (most), MD, MA, MI, MO, NJ, PA SC, TN, VT	39.0
8:00 a.m. EST	AZ, FL (some), IA, KS (some), MN, MS, NH, OK, (some)	14.0
8:30 a.m. EST	AR	1.0
9:00 a.m. EST	AL, CO, MT, NE, NM, OR (some), SD, UT, WI (m WY	8.1
10:00 a.m. EST	CA, ID (most), NV, ND (most), OR (most), WA	14.8
11:00 a.m. EST	ID (some), ND (some)	0.0

Poll closing times, by state, in Eastern time

Required closing time	States	Percent of eligib citizens, 1996
6:00 p.m. EST	IN (most), KY (most)	3.9
7:00 p.m. EST	FL (most), GA, IN (some), KY (some), NH (most), VT, VA	13.2
7:30 p.m. EST	NC, OH, WV	8.2
8:00 p.m. EST	AL, CT, DE, DC, FL (some), IL, KS (most), ME, M MI (most), MS, MO, NH (some), NJ, ND (most), O TN, TX	39.1
8:30 p.m. EST	AR	1.0
9:00 p.m. EST	AZ, CO, KS (some), LA, MI (some), MN, NE, NM, ND (some), RI, SD, WI, WY	17.2
10:00 p.m. EST	ID (most), IA, MT, NV, OR (some), UT	3.2
11:00 p.m. EST	CA, ID (some), OR (most), WA	13.5

Source: www.cnn.com/election/1998/states

One effect of uniform hours of operation would be on election administration. On one hand, time set earlier in the day would require election officials in the western states to begin their operations much earlier than they have in the past. Precincts serving 24 percent of the electorate currently open later than 8:00 a.m. EST. On another hand, a time set later would require poll workers in the eastern states to

[7] In many states there is local variation in opening and closing times, especially in opening times. Several states specify that the polls shall not open later than a legislated time but allow local election officials to open the polls earlier.

continue their work much later into the evening and extend the count well into the night. Polling places serving 66 percent of the electorate currently close before 6:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time.

A second effect of uniform hours of operation would be on the voters themselves. As shown in the next table, about 65 percent of all voters go to the polls before 4:00 p.m. local time, but 15 percent—one in seven—vote after 6:00 p.m. local time.[8]

Time of day voted, 1980

Hour of day voted	Percent of voters	Percent of voters polls
Before 12 p.m.	41.4	43.6
Between 12 p.m. and 4 p.m.	20.7	21.8
Between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m.	18.7	19.7
After 6 p.m.	14.2	15.0
By absentee	5.0	

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

The hours that people turn out to vote vary across regions, in ways that would make uniform polling hours a greater problem on the West Coast. Voters in the middle of the country prefer to vote early, two thirds of them by 4:00 p.m. local time. Greater numbers of voters on the coasts prefer to vote later. Voters in the Pacific time zone prefer to turn out later than voters in any other part of the country: 19 percent of the voter turnout occurs after 6:00 p.m. Under a uniform closing law, late voters in the West would be at the top of the list of those affected.[9]

Time voted, by time zone

Time voted	Eastern	Central	Mountain	Pacific
Before 12 p.m.	43.4	43.8	42.8	43.9
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	21.5	23.0	24.0	17.3
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	18.7	21.0	19.5	19.8
After 6 p.m.	16.5	12.3	13.8	19.0
Total	99.9%	100.1	100.1	100.0
(N)	(27155)	(20351)	(5699)	(6610)

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

Changes in the hours of voting would also affect different types of people in different ways. Later opening times would impose the greatest burdens on older voters, while earlier closing times would impose most on younger voters. Sixty-three percent of voters over the age of 65 turn out before noon, and 22 percent of voters between 18 and 25 turn out after 6:00.

Time voted, by age

[8] Unfortunately, the 1980s were the last time the Current Population Surveys asked for time of day voted. Since 1980, the main trends in the population have been the continued distribution of population westward, the continued aging of the population, and the sharp rise in the Latino population.

[9] According to the Current Population Survey, the time of turnout was slightly earlier in 1984, a less competitive national election. The regional pattern was the same: later on the coasts than inland, and latest in the West. *Current Population Report*, Series P20-405, March 1986.

Time voted	18–25	26–45	46–64	65 +
Before 12 p.m.	29.7	37.5	45.8	63.1
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	23.7	20.6	20.4	25.8
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	24.9	22.8	20.2	7.9
After 6 p.m.	21.8	19.1	13.6	3.3
Total	100.1%	100.0	100.0	100.1
(N)	(8414)	(26764)	(19502)	(12017)

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

If one factor in the times people choose to vote is age, another is work circumstances. Students, disabled people unable to work, and armed forces personnel vote in large numbers by absentee. Of those who vote in person, people who are not in the labor force either tend to vote early in the day, in the case of homemakers, retirees, and disabled persons, or in the middle of the day, in the case of students. Working people vote at the beginning of the day, before work, or at the end of the day, after work.

Time voted, by selected work statuses

Time voted	Working	Looking for w	Homemaker	In school	Unable to wor	Other, includir retired
Before 12 p.m.	37.0	44.2	53.3	32.5	54.6	64.0
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	19.1	27.8	27.5	26.4	28.2	24.9
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	24.3	15.6	11.8	25.1	12.9	7.7
After 6 p.m.	18.5	12.4	7.4	15.9	4.3	3.4
Total	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0
(N)	(39311)	(1892)	(11410)	(1011)	(443)	(7389)

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

The workday differs across employments, in ways that affect preferences for times of voting. The day for white collar workers begins later and ends later than the workday for blue collar workers. As the next table shows, people in managerial and professional employment tend to prefer to vote early. More distinctly, so do farmers, fishers, and foresters. People employed as operators, assemblers, and handlers, on the other hand, tend to prefer to vote late. (People with higher occupational status also vote more often by absentee.) It has long been part of political lore that Republicans turn out early and Democrats turn out late; occupational differences account for the pattern.[10]

Time voted, by selected occupational classes

Time voted	Managerial, professional	Technical, sales, clerical	Operators, assen handlers	Farmers, fishers, foresters
Before 12 p.m.	42.3	38.3	31.0	42.4
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	17.8	19.9	18.4	23.7
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	22.0	22.4	29.0	16.6
After 6 p.m.	17.9	19.4	21.6	17.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

[10] The partisan differences in time of voting are perhaps not as sharp as they may have been in the past. Running counter are the differences in time of voting across income and education. Better educated people vote later than less educated people, and except at the very highest levels, earners of high incomes vote later than poorer people. Republican affiliation, of course, rises with education and income. Part of the responsibility for this pattern is that the poorest and least educated in 1980 were disproportionately elderly.

(N)	(13229)	(14975)	(10655)	(1555)

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

Demographically, only one more difference is worthy of note. Blacks and whites turn out throughout the day in almost equal proportion. But by about six percentage points, Latino voters prefer to vote at the end of Election Day rather than the beginning.[11] The Latino population has long been concentrated in the Southwest—a third of all Americans of Hispanic origin reside in California—and since 1980 the percentage of Americans of Latin descent has nearly doubled.

Time voted, for Latinos and non-Latinos

Time voted	Latino	Non-Latino
Before 12 p.m.	37.9	43.7
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	20.8	21.8
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	20.5	19.6
After 6 p.m.	20.8	14.9
Total	100.0	100.0
(N)	(1460)	(59996)

Source: Current Population Survey, 1980

Accordingly, hours that are skewed toward the morning will tend to make it harder for younger voters and working class voters to get to the polls and hours that are skewed toward the evening will make it harder for older and upper class voters to turn out. Compared to the current, decentralized regime of poll hours, a uniform poll closing law would reduce the number of evening hours in the western states and dampen turnout most among workers who are young, blue collar, and Latino. Conversely, a nationwide poll hours law would reduce the number of morning hours in the eastern states and dampen turnout most among people who are older, white collar, and white. Any politically feasible uniform hours law would probably require West Coast polls to close no earlier than 7:00 p.m. local time, which with a 13-hour Election Day would require East Coast polls to open no earlier than 9:00 a.m. local.[12] Overall, by expanding evening hours and restricting morning hours in the eastern half of the United States, a nationwide hours law would apparently make Election Day more convenient for younger voters and less convenient for older voters. By expanding morning hours and contracting evening hours in the West, however, a uniform polling time law would make Election Day less convenient for Latino voters.

To be sure, most voters who are no longer able to turn out at the time of day they previously preferred will find other times to vote. But if we imagine that voters currently make choices that offer the most convenience, any change is likely to lower the probability that they turn out at all, at least marginally. The inconvenience is unlikely to deter people who are highly motivated to vote: strong partisans, the politically engaged, the highly educated. The added trouble is more likely to deter people who are less motivated to vote. Because they tend to turn out later in the day, and because they tend to vote less often already, we might conjecture that a uniform closing law would be a particular hardship for younger voters and Latino voters.

[11] One reason is that the Latino population is younger on average than the Anglo population.
[12] Or 8:30 a.m. local, if hours were staggered as in Canada.

Effects of uniform reporting

Because a uniform polling time seems such a draconian step, observers concerned about the effect of early projections of election results have proposed other measures. In recent hearings, representatives of exit polling organizations have outlined their protocols for election calls, which incorporate a mix of information from exit polls and from early returns. Accordingly, one suggestion put forth by critics of the media polls is that eastern states should embargo the release of election returns until the western polls have closed and thereby deny exit poll analysts the information they need to make calls. Idaho state law, for instance, forbids release of official returns from its Mountain time counties until polls close in the Pacific zone counties.

In close elections, the election returns are a very important part of the information needed to produce projections. Still, even in close elections, returns are not absolutely essential to the task of making projections. Like all sample surveys, exit polls have a statistical "margin of error" that reflects the level of confidence the analyst can have in a conclusion drawn from the survey, for example, a conclusion about who has won the election. The margin of error depends predominantly upon the number of interviews (the "size of the sample"): the larger is the number of interviews, the smaller is the margin of error. In a very close race, the vote difference between the candidates will often be smaller than the poll's margin of error, so that an analyst does not have enough confidence in the projection to make the call. If precinct and county returns are consistent with the results of the exit poll, they can provide the additional confidence the analyst needs to project a winner. If precinct and county returns are inconsistent with the exit poll, they can instead cause the analyst to await additional information before making a projection.

When a race is close, then, the returns are important as a complement to the results from the exit polls. Analysts need precinct and county tallies when the margin of error in the survey is too large to have confidence that the candidate with the lead in the exit poll is in fact the winner. But analysts can remedy their uncertainty other than by recourse to official election returns. If the returns are unavailable to them, they can collect larger samples. As the following table shows, for any vote margin between two candidates there is a sample that is large enough to make a projection with a high degree of confidence strictly from exit polls.

Number of exit interviews needed to project a winner, by margin of victory and risk of incorrect projection

Actual margin of victory	Risk of incorrect projection			
	1 in 20	*1 in 100*	*1 in 500*	*1 in 1000*
5.0%	1,073	2,166	3,332	3,810
3.0%	2.986	6,026	9,272	10,599
2.0%	6,721	13,567	20,872	23,861
1.5%	11,951	24,123	37,112	42,435
1.0%	26,893	54,284	83,513	95,471
0.5%	107,581	217,150	334,076	381,914
0.25%	430,333	868,619	1,336,328	1,527,686

In practical terms, to call a race as close as those listed to the bottom of the table, exit poll samples would need to be considerably larger than they currently are. In 1996, the VNS exit samples ranged in

size from 795 in Mississippi to 2232 in North Carolina, 2423 in Texas, and 3282 in California. The samples tended to be a little larger in states with competitive races for the presidency and in states with spirited contests for senator or governor.[13] In most instances, however, even these sample sizes are sufficient in themselves to make an election call: races decided by margins of less than 5 percent are not so common.

Restriction on release of official returns, accordingly, will not necessarily cause exit polling organizations to delay election projections. It could cause them instead to invest in larger exit poll samples in election districts where outcomes are expected to be close. To be sure, restriction on release of returns would raise the costs of exit polling, and significantly. As the table shows, a 50 percent reduction in the margin of error, say from 1.0 percent to 0.5 percent, requires not a two-fold increase in sample size but a four-fold increase.[14] The election returns might not be essential for exit poll projections as a theoretical matter but they might well be as a practical matter.[15]

Moreover, and more importantly, it is not clear that exit poll operations need access to "official" reports of election results either at the county or state level. According to Michael Traugott, who has consulted for the industry, exit poll organizations gather their information about the early returns by posting people in precincts to observe the count. Most states require that the counts be open to public scrutiny, in large part to reassure campaigns that the count is being conducted legally and fairly.

Provisions for public observation of ballot counts, ten selected states

Arizona	"…under the observation of representatives of each political party and public"
Colorado	"…conducted under the observation of watchers"
California	"…shall be open to the view of the public"
Georgia	"…shall be open to the view of the public"
Massachusetts	"…the ballots taken therefrom and audibly counted in public view"
Montana	"…count shall be public"
New Hampshire	"…counting of votes shall be public"
Tennessee	"Each political party and any organization of citizens interested in a qu on the ballot or interested in preserving the purity of elections and in g against abuse of the elective franchise may appoint poll watchers…. A watcher may also inspect all ballots while being called and counted an tally sheets and poll lists during preparation and certification."
Utah	"Proceedings at the counting center are public and may be observed by interested persons."
Wyoming	"After all the votes are cast and the polls are officially declared closed election judges shall be permitted in a polling place."

Source: State statutes, compiled by Aaron Longo

[13] Washington, where Gary Locke became the first Asian-American elected to the governorship of a continental 48 state, drew 1895 interviews, and New Hampshire, where Jeanne Shaheen was the first woman elected governor of the state, attracted 2047 interviews.

[14] Mathematically, this is because the statistical margin of error diminishes by the square root of sample size.

[15] Official returns might be useful for other purposes as well. Because exit polls do not sample in every precinct, they must weight the results from each precinct by precinct turnout to achieve a representative sample of the whole election district. The returns provide a cross check on assumptions about turnout. Because exit polls typically sample a set proportion of voters as they leave the polls, however, exit poll analysts already have a measure of turnout at hand in the number of interviews in each precinct.

Selected references

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