

## Real-Time Vote Projections on Election Day – A Truly Bad Idea

By Kitty Garber, FFEC, September 17, 2016

The announcement that a new organization called VoteCastr is planning to report detailed, real-time projections of results during the course of the day on election day ought to frighten anyone with any sense—or at least anyone old enough to remember why news organizations decided to forego publishing results until the polls closed. In the soul-searching by the media after the 2000 election debacle, its members concluded that the media had seriously failed the public by making projections based on data that had not been properly vetted. These erroneous projections—first for Al Gore and then for George Bush—helped to fuel the suspicion and hostility that created nothing less than a national crisis in the aftermath of the election.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why news organizations shouldn't announce election results prior to the closing of the polls on election day is that they don't actually *have* any results. County and state elections offices are prohibited by law from releasing results prior to poll closing. Thus, VoteCastr's real-time "results" will not be based on even a single actual vote, but on predictive turnout modeling and exit polling. To believe that these can be used to report results accurately is beyond foolish—it is reckless.

Exit polling has proven to be an especially dangerous way to predict results. In 2004, exit polls confidently predicted that John Kerry would win Florida and Ohio—but it didn't happen. When actual results didn't match the polling numbers, people were suspicious. After all, they pointed out, the pollsters talked only to people who had actually voted. But they didn't talk to every voter, of course, just a selected sample. Sometimes the sample is not representative of voters as a whole. And sometimes people lie to pollsters or avoid them. Here in Florida, a large portion of the vote is cast by absentee ballot. Attempts to contact these voters can be problematic as many people screen their calls and decline to speak to pollsters.

While predictive turnout models are extremely useful to political campaigns, they are equally problematic when used in place of actual results. These statistically constructed models allow campaigns to track whether their voters (as defined by the model) are turning out in the numbers needed for success. In the final days of the campaign, this kind of information allows them to focus their resources for maximum effectiveness. Precise accuracy is not obtainable, but it is not required.

But accuracy is necessary for reporting results. And regardless of their sophistication, these predictive models can still be wrong. Not only is it possible that their assumptions are wrong, but the mere publication of the information could change voter behavior in ways not foreseen by the model.

Perhaps the best example of what can go wrong when exit polling and predictive data are used in place of actual results is the 2000 election debacle. Even before all the polls had closed in Florida, VNS confidently predicted that Al Gore would be the winner. Based on the VNS data, all the media outlets then called Florida for Gore. So early in the evening, the public believed that Gore had won Florida and most likely the presidency. But the predictions were based on faulty polling and data entry errors. Within hours, the media one by one retracted the call for Gore and put Florida back in the undecided column. Now everyone was unhappy. But it got worse. More mistakes over the course of the evening led VNS to compound its previous bad call by making another dubious call for George Bush at slightly after 2:00 in the morning. Once again, the call was based on bad data—incorrect numbers from Volusia County, along with faulty projections about the number of uncounted ballots in Democratic-leaning south Florida.

Imagine what could happen this time. Let's say, the model predicts throughout the day that Trump will win Florida. When the ballots are counted, however, Clinton has won by a considerable margin. Why? Perhaps the model overestimated Trump's support among a particular group of voters. And perhaps minorities showed up in large numbers to vote at the end of the day in a last ditch attempt to derail a Trump win. Or perhaps Trump supporters who were ill or just didn't feel like waiting in long lines decided not to vote because they were informed that it no longer really mattered. It would be hard to imagine all the possibilities, but the consequences are clearly foreseeable—Trump supporters will feel that they must have been cheated. And all of us will feel that the media have failed us again. Their professional responsibility is to report on elections, not influence them.