

The Eleventh Morris Hansen Lecture Opening Remarks

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Sometime ago, the year 2000 national election riveted attention in the U.S. and the world as few other political events had done in this country's history. It started with the TV networks' errors in the Florida vote, and then spread to concerns over the quality of the counts more generally, raising questions about the ability of the voting systems used throughout the U.S. to reflect the actual intent of the voters. The problems uncovered are still with us. Recently Washington Post has contained extensive reports on the uncertainties and vagaries inherent in the voting procedures generally used in the U.S. The Florida situation also highlighted how dependent we are on the TV projections of the winners, and the loss of faith when an error is made. The two reversals by the TV networks on the projected winners seemed to illustrate to the public that the emperor had no clothes. A more salutary effect was to push the networks into a reexamination of the processes used to develop the early estimates of the winners.

The projections and exit polls do more than just beat the total counts by a few hours. About ten years ago, a paper appeared in JASA entitled, "The Chilean Plebiscite: Projections Without Historic Data." The authors described the early projections of winners in a plebiscite in Chile to determine whether the dictator Pinochet should remain in power or whether there should be an election. Pinochet had agreed to the plebiscite on the assumption that he would win. The authors claimed, quite plausibly, that the existence of independent estimates of the vote count prevented Pinochet from distorting the results, and thus contributed to the end of the dictatorship. In this country, we have not had such dramatic uses of the data. However, the exit polls which were introduced a little after the start of the projections have been the major source of knowledge of the political and social factors influencing how people vote. About two or three o'clock in the morning on Election Day in 2000, as I sat in Warren Mitofsky's office, depressed by the fact we had reversed ourselves for the second time on the Florida results, I was somewhat comforted by the thought that what we were doing had a useful social purpose.

The committee organizing the Hansen lectures thought that the first anniversary of the 2000 election was an appropriate time for a session on election night estimation. The issues are still in all our minds, and the elapsed time would permit more reflective thinking than would have been possible in an earlier session, as well as a report of changes considered for the future.

Our two speakers were the obvious choices as speakers. They first introduced a fairly rigorous statistical system for early projections, and have been involved in its implementation

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ever since. They will review the methods that have been used over the years, the networks' motivations for broadcasting projections, and the controversies, particularly the Florida situation, that have ensued. Our discussant is thoroughly familiar with the projection models used. He has participated in making the final decisions on who are the likely winners since 1996, and has been a key member of a panel.

Our first speaker will be Warren Mitofsky. Warren is president of Mitofsky International which conducts election surveys worldwide. He was a founder of the television networks' election projection consortium and its first executive director. Prior to that he was executive director of the CBS News Election Unit and executive producer for election broadcasts. He started the CBS/NY Times Poll, introduced probability methods into election coverage, including the first exit poll. He and I developed the first efficient method of RDD telephone sampling. He has served as president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the National Council on Public Polls, and the Research Industry Coalition. He is a Fellow of the American Statistical Association. Like many other statisticians involved in survey research and methods, he began his career at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Our second speaker will be Murray Edelman. Murray is Editorial Director of Voter News Service, a pool of ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, NBC, and the Associated Press, where he is responsible for exit polling and election estimation. He is responsible for estimates of winners in 500 separate elections, and for exit polls of 100,000 voters on Election Day. Prior to that, as Associate Director at CBS News, he, Warren Mitofsky, and I developed the statistical models used for the elections. Murray is currently the past president of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Edelman began his career as a mathematical statistician at the U.S. Bureau of the Census. He received a BS from the University of Illinois and in 1973, a PhD in Human Development from the University of Chicago.

Our discussant will be Martin Frankel. Martin Frankel is Professor and Deputy Chair of Statistics and Computer Information Systems at Baruch College, City University of New York. He is also Senior Statistical Scientist at Abt Associates. Frankel holds a PhD and MA from the University of Michigan and is a Fellow of the ASA. He has worked on the NBC Election Decision Desk since 1996.

Being a sampling statistician has allowed and continues to allow Marty to become involved in applications that are diverse, challenging, and interesting. In addition to his work on the elections, some of the areas where he has worked include childhood immunization and health, treatment of HIV-AIDS, atomic power plant safety, narcotics prosecution, and media ratings. A paper of his, jointly written with Leslie Kish, was one of the papers included in a recent publication of the International Association of Survey Statisticians, entitled "Landmark Papers in Survey Statistics." The paper was largely based on Marty's PhD dissertation, a remarkable achievement for a young statistician.