



Are the networks biased? “Calling” states in the 2000 presidential election *

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Abstract. Among the controversies arising from the 2000 Presidential election was the accusation that media networks called, or projected, a winner faster in those states won by Albert Gore than in those states won by George W. Bush. We investigate this accusation by estimating a Tobit model of the length of time between states’ poll closing times and the times at which CNN projected a winner. Our results support the charge of media bias. After controlling for other factors that affect how quickly a state is called, states called for Gore were called 14 to 18 minutes faster than those called in favor of Bush.

1. Introduction

The controversial 2000 Presidential election has proven to be a fertile field for economic analysis. Analysts have addressed a number of more-or-less separate issues. Knack and Kropf (2001) examine the usage of the now infamous punch card ballots and “find little support for the view that resource constraints cause poorer counties with large minority populations to retain antiquated or inferior voting equipment.” Spiegel (2000) focuses on claims that the Florida vote recount was influenced by (Democratic) partisan biases and concludes “that it is highly unlikely that the relative increase in Gore’s vote total can be explained by mechanical reading errors.” Rasmusen (2001) considers methods of settling close elections that may be marred by fraud and determines that a “coin flip can be a good way to settle an election if the margin of victory is small and it is known that there is a good chance of fraud by one candidate.”

Yet another source of concern is that the media’s 7:52 p.m. calling of Florida for Gore and reports that polls in Florida closed at 7:00 p.m. eastern time may have suppressed Republican turnout in Florida’s panhandle counties,

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Table 1. States with delayed calls

Margin of victory	Number of states with delayed calls
Bush +11 or more	3
Bush +6 to +10	6
Bush 0 to +5	6
Gore 0 to +5	9
Gore +6 to +10	0
Gore +11 or more	0

potentially swaying Florida's outcome in favor of Vice President Gore. Lott (2001) uses data from the 1976 to 2000 presidential elections and "documents an unusual and large drop off in Republican voting rates for Florida's western panhandle counties." By contrast, Sobel and Lawson (undated) use cross-sectional data to examine the media's effect on Republican voting in the Florida panhandle and "find no significant impact on the Gore/Bush vote differential."

A related and heretofore unexamined aspect of the 2000 election's aftermath is the claim that the media may have called (i.e., projected winners in) states won by Vice President Gore faster than it called states won by Governor Bush. Typical is the following suggestion by Rep. Billy Tauzin (Republican, Louisiana):

I can't understand why ... it took an hour to report Georgia with a 13 percent vote lead for Governor Bush, and yet ... Florida was reported [in] the only 15 minute cycle that Gore was ahead.¹

Indeed, Table 1, which shows the number of states with delayed calls tabulated by the state's margin of victory, supports Rep. Tauzin's claim of media bias. (A delayed call is one that did not occur immediately upon the closing of the state's polls.) Nine states with Bush victories by six or more percentage points had delayed calls whereas no state which went for Gore by six or more percentage points received a delayed call. Among the states with delayed calls, the mean margin of victory for states carried by Bush was 6.9 percentage points and the mean margin of victory for states carried by Gore was 2.3 percentage points. A t-test indicates that this difference in the average margin of victory between Gore states and Bush states is significant at the 1% level.

Of course, the networks reject the allegations of bias. Tom Johnson of CNN responded in a House Energy and Commerce committee hearing called by Rep. Tauzin:

I do want to respond to one question that's been raised and I think it's been emphasized earlier today, our reporting about election night was unbiased. CNN's selection of which states to project winners at particular times in the evening was not biased.²

This controversy over media bias in vote calling is the subject of our paper. It should be noted, however, that we merely seek to test for the presence of media bias in calling states. We address neither the potential motives for nor consequences of any media bias that may exist. Although the motive for and consequences of media bias in calling states are not the focus of our paper, we note two possible sources of media bias. First, the media might seek to influence votes (electoral or popular) in western states whose polls close later than eastern states (see Carpini, 1984; Epstein and Strom, 1981; and Jackson, 1983 for studies on this topic). Second, the bias could be the result of flawed methodology in the Voter News Service, the media consortium for exit polling and vote reporting which compiles the data on which calls are based.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses our methodology and data for examining the question of media bias in declaring winners in states. Section 3 contains our empirical results and Section 4 offers some brief concluding remarks.

2. Methodology and data

We posit the following equation for the length of time it takes the media to call states:

$$\text{CALLLAG}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{MARGIN}_i + \gamma \text{ELECTORS}_i + \delta \text{POLL}_i + \tau \text{GORE}_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where CALLLAG_i is the number of minutes between state i 's polls closing and CNN's³ calling it for either Bush or Gore. The source of the CNN call lag data is the House Energy and Commerce Committee.⁴ The error term is ε_i .

MARGIN_i is the absolute margin of victory (measured in percentage points) in state i . β is expected to be negative since it is hypothesized that the larger the margin of victory in state i , the faster that the state can be called for a candidate. The margin of victory data are also obtained from the House Energy and Commerce committee's website.

ELECTORS_i is the number of electoral votes in state i . The sign of γ is unclear *a priori*. On one hand, the media probably call states with more electoral

votes faster than states with few electoral votes since the more populous states are a larger portion of the television audience and because those states have a larger impact toward the 270 electoral votes required for victory. On the other hand, if it takes longer to tabulate votes in larger states then the media might actually be slower to declare a victor in larger states.⁵ The number of electors is obtained from Barone and Cohen (2001).

$POLL_i$ is the absolute margin between Bush and Gore in polls taken prior to the election in state i . *Ceteris paribus*, states in which one candidate has a large lead in preelection polls should be called faster than states which preelection polling indicated would be close races. Consequently, the expected sign of δ is negative. The source for the polling data is the electyou.com website.⁶

$GORE_i$ is a dichotomous variable taking a value of unity in states CNN called for Vice President Gore and zero for states called for Governor Bush. The sign of τ is the primary concern of the paper – it will be negative if Gore states were called faster than Bush states and positive if Bush states were called faster than Gore states. Data on which states were called for Gore and which ones were called for Bush were also obtained from the House Energy and Commerce committee's website.

An additional comment about the data is in order. Our sample consists of 49 states, with Oregon omitted. Oregon is omitted because it was not decided for either candidate until several days after the election because of its mail-in balloting procedures.

3. Results

Since twenty-six of the states in the sample have call lags of zero (i.e., they were called immediately upon their polls closing), OLS is an inappropriate estimation technique. More appropriate is Tobit estimation which was designed for censored samples. Results of estimating our model with Tobit are given in Table 2; the marginal effects of the regressors conditional on the dependent variable being uncensored are reported with the corresponding t-statistics in parentheses.

The column labelled (1) contains the estimates obtained using the full sample. As hypothesized, the margin of victory is significantly negatively related to the time taken to project a winner in a state. Given that the call lag is positive, an increase of one percentage point in the margin of victory reduces the call lag by five minutes. An additional electoral vote is estimated to reduce the call lag by about one minute when the observed call lag is greater than zero, but this effect is not significantly different from zero. The coefficient on $POLL$ indicates that each additional percentage point difference between the

Table 2. Tobit estimates of the time lag in calling states
 $CALLLAG_i = \alpha + \beta MARGIN_i + \gamma ELECTORS_i + \delta POLL_i + \tau GORE_i + \varepsilon_i$.

Variable	(1)	(2)
MARGIN	-5.004 ^a (-4.50)	-2.978 ^a (-5.86)
ELECTORS	-1.072 (-1.61)	-0.750 ^b (-2.29)
POLL	-0.417 (-0.47)	-0.581 (-1.36)
GORE	-14.353 ^c (-1.65)	-18.169 ^a (-4.05)
Constant	73.403 (6.78)	56.774 (10.60)
Log likelihood	-141.690	-114.614
Pseudo-R ²	0.177	0.246
Excluded states	-	WI, IA
No. of obs.	49	47
No. of censored obs.	26	26
No. of uncensored obs.	23	21

Note. Column (1) contains estimates with full sample, and Column (2) contains estimates after dropping WI and IA from the full sample. The parentheses contain t-statistics and the reported coefficients are the marginal effect of the change in the dependent variable conditional on it being uncensored, that is, $\partial E[CALLAG|CALLAG > 0, X]/\partial X$. The superscripts ^a, ^b and ^c indicate coefficients that are significantly different from zero at the one, five, and ten percent levels, respectively.

candidates in pre-election polling reduces the call lag by 0.4 minutes, but this estimate of the effect is not significantly different from zero. The variable of interest for determining the presence of media bias, GORE, indicates that the states won by Gore were called fourteen minutes faster than states won by Bush, conditional on a positive call lag, and this difference is statistically significant at the ten percent level. The regression analysis therefore supports the contention that the media were biased in calling states won by Vice President Gore faster than states won by Gov. Bush.

A concern in analyzing the call lags is the possibility that the networks became more cautious in calling close states in the aftermath of the Florida reversal. (Of course, there is no reason to believe that the Florida debacle had any effect on the networks' calls of states such as Wyoming, which Bush won by forty one percentage points, or Hawaii, a traditionally Democratic state

which Gore won by eighteen percentage points.) If this is the case then the extra caution in calling close states might mask any bias that was present in calls made earlier in the evening. Indeed, Wisconsin (552 minutes), Iowa (420 minutes), and New Hampshire (307 minutes) had margins of one percentage point and call lags in excess of 5 hours. Note that the concern that these long calls in close states might conceal any bias in calling states arises not merely from the long lags but also from the fact the two longest call lags (Wisconsin and Iowa) were for states won by Gore. Therefore, in order to investigate the possibility that states with excruciatingly close contests and long call lags obscure any bias present in calling states, we test for the presence of outliers that unduly influence the estimates by calculating Welsch's Distance for each state.⁷ As expected, this calculation finds that two states, Iowa and Wisconsin, have Welsch's Distances in excess of the critical value. Consequently, we eliminate these states from the sample and reestimate the model.⁸

The results of this exercise are reported in column (2). As before, the margin of victory is significantly negatively related to the time lag in calling states. Conditional on the call lag being greater than zero, a one percentage point increase in the margin of victory is estimated to decrease the call lag by nearly three minutes. Similar to the estimated effect using the full sample, an increase of one elector is estimated to reduce a state's call lag by about one minute when the call lag is uncensored. Unlike the results obtained from the full sample, however, this effect is now significantly different from zero at the 5% level. As with the full sample results, the coefficient on POLL is not significantly different from zero. Regarding GORE, the variable of interest for assessing media bias, the results using the reduced sample indicate that Gore states were called faster than Bush states. Conditional on having a positive call lag and holding the margin of victory, the number of electors, and the pre-election polling constant, states called for Vice President Gore were done so 18 minutes faster than states called for Gov. Bush and this difference is statistically significant at the 1% level. Hence, estimating the model without the outliers strengthens the significance of the estimated coefficient on GORE.

4. Conclusion

Claims of media bias are nothing new in American politics so it is not surprising that a claim of bias is part of the controversy following the 2000 Presidential election.⁹ In this paper we use media call times to investigate the claims of media bias. Our results indicate that the media called states won by Gore significantly faster than those won by Bush. The consequences, if any, resulting from this bias remain the subject for future research.

Notes

1. “Fox News Sunday,” November 12, 2000.
2. House Energy and Commerce Committee Hearing, February 14, 2001.
3. Note that, strictly speaking, our results will only apply to CNN. Nonetheless, we use the terms “media” and “networks” in our discussion because the testimony in the House Energy and Commerce committee hearing cited above suggests a strong correlation among network call times. This correlation probably arises from the use of the Voter News Service by all the major networks. As an empirical matter, our analysis is limited to CNN because complete lists of call times are unavailable for the other networks.
4. URL: com-notes.house.gov/all.pdf
5. Since calls are at least partly based on exit polling and projections we tend to discount state population as a significant factor in the amount of time required to call a state, but, for completeness, we acknowledge the possibility. Note also that state size might actually work in the opposite direction if rural states have less efficient systems for tabulating and reporting votes.
6. URL: [www.electyou.com/electoral map.htm](http://www.electyou.com/electoral_map.htm)
7. See Welsch (1982).
8. An alternative approach would be to drop all states called after the Florida reversal and reestimate the model; however, only 18 states had been called at that time and 14 of those had call lags of zero.
9. See Efron (1971) for an early attempt to document media bias.

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