

Fixing the U.S. Election Polling Problems Means Fixing Election Problems

By Kathy Frankovic, CBS News

As we all know, the U.S. election of 2000 refused to end and involved every possible unit of the American political system – courts, legislatures, and executive officers – and underscored not just long-standing doubts about the media’s role on election day, but also several unpleasant realities of an outdated, complex American electoral system.

As for polling, this was a successful election — despite the confusion of election night, when Florida was first called for Gore, then later for Bush, and then retracted once again. The pre-election polls all came very close to the final popular vote (where less than a percentage point separated President George W. Bush and the popular vote winner, Al Gore).

Accusations that media polls “over-represented Democrats” made after the 1996 election, and throughout the Monica Lewinsky-impeachment tangle, did not apply to the 2000 pre-election polls. This year, the polls gave fair warning of the 35-day “election night” and the excruciating struggle over which candidate would succeed Bill Clinton in the White House.

But the reverberations of those earlier attacks on polls – many of which were made by political partisans – influenced the post-election discussion. The election day exit polls were astonishingly accurate on the national level, as well as in a number of states, but they were also part of the electoral nightmare called Florida. Immediately after the election, radio talk shows focused on charges that television news organizations were “too slow” to call states for Bush and “too quick” to call states for Gore. Some, including Republican members of congress, went so far as to accuse the news media of “incontrovertible bias.”

In the last WAPOR Newsletter, Phil Meyer wrote about the perils of relying on one source of exit poll data for election night calls — in this case, that the data provided by Voter News Service, a consortium of ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, NBC and the Associated Press. But the Florida electoral nightmare involved more than an exit poll. Neither the errant Gore call (at 7:50 p.m. EST, nearly an hour after 95% of the polls in Florida had closed) nor the early Bush call (at 2:17 a.m. EST the next morning) relied solely on exit poll data.

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The President’s Corner



Brian Gosschalk
WAPOR president

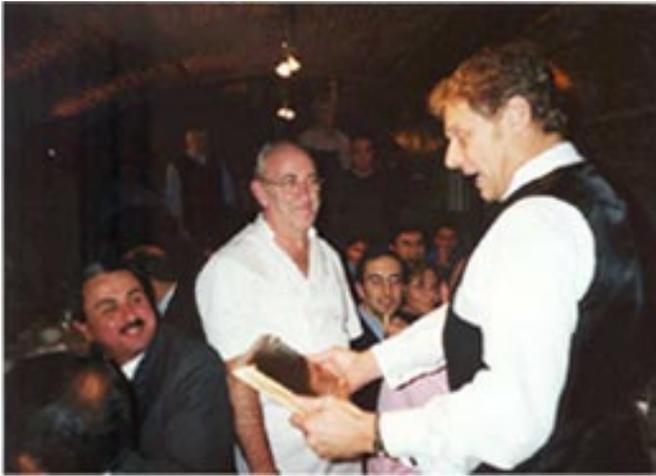
It is a great honour and privilege to be elected as WAPOR’s President for the next two years.

I still retain vivid memories of the first WAPOR seminar I attended in Bonn in January 1980. As a star-struck, fresh-faced youngster (now barely recognisable!) it was a privilege to meet some of the greats of survey research, including Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Humphrey Taylor, the late Jean Stoetzel, Hélène Riffault, Bob Worcester, Hans Zetterberg and others. I was struck by the openness and generosity of these and other attendees – where else but WAPOR do young researchers and students have such opportunities to meet, discuss and debate with, and listen to, the top practitioners in their field?

See **President**, page 4

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Above: Wolfgang Donsbach, WAPOR ex-president, reads a plate given to the El Pocico gastronomic association's president, thanking him and his colleagues for his warm hospitality in opening their club and cooking freely for us.

Below: Claes de Vreese (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands) delivers his speech. Kim Smith (Iowa State University) sitting.



Above: Reception in the Palacio de Navarra (seat of the Navarra government) Esteban Lopez-Escobar, WAPOR executive council member; Hans Zetterberg, WAPOR ex-president; Alfonso Sanchez-Tabernero, Dean of the School of Communication, University of Navarra.

Below: Reception at the City Hall. Prof. Yolanda Barcina, Major of Pamplona; Hans Zetterberg, WAPOR ex-president; Esteban Lopez-Escobar, organizer.



Above: It is a round table, chaired by the WAPOR president (at that moment) Miguel Basanez, with Spanish pollsters. From left to right: Jose Ignacio Wert, Demoscopia; Josefina Elias, Opina; Miguel Basanez; Antonio Vera, Eco Consulting; Gines Garrido, Sigma Dos.

Below: WAPOR President Miguel Basanez receives a gift (a book) at the Navarra Government reception. From left to right: Jesus Laguna, regional minister of education; Prof. Jose Maria Bastero, University of Navarra president; Miguel Basanez; Miguel Sanz, President of the Navarra government.



A Provocative Conference in Pamplona

By Dr. Robert Stevenson, University of North Carolina

The questions followed us across the Atlantic and surfaced regularly at coffee breaks and even at several panels. Who really had won the U.S. presidential election, and what happened to the already infamous exit polls? With the effects

As expected, Esteban López-Escobar and his colleagues at the University of Navarra put together a winning combination of provocative panels, extraordinary hospitality, and a small army of students who anticipated most of our needs and responded cheerfully and efficiently to any others.

of jetlag and (for most of us) the miseries of long-distance economy class, it was a challenge to offer much insight into these questions, even in a setting as pleasant as Pamplona.

For those who already knew the city, the university, and our hosts at the WAPOR regional conference, however, anticipation pushed aside the unpleasanties of travel. As expected, Esteban López-Escobar and his colleagues at the University of Navarra put together a winning combination of

provocative panels, extraordinary hospitality, and a small army of students who anticipated most of our needs and responded cheerfully and efficiently to any others.

The growing appeal of WAPOR regional conferences is reflected in the statistics: number of participants (70, plus students), countries and continents represented (16 and 5), number of panels (6, plus a roundtable), number of papers (24), working languages (at least two), value to the participants (beyond measure, of course). The list of delegates reflected the usual WAPOR arc across the North Atlantic, but included participants from Armenia, Egypt, South Africa, and Taiwan as well. Twelve came from Latin America.

The large number of Latin American participants is a tribute to the promotion of WAPOR by President Miguel Basáñez, who was on hand for the conference. Past President Max McCombs took time from his Thanksgiving turkey in Austin to email his greetings, which were added to those of the university, the city, and the regional government.

The panels reflected the usual interests of WAPOR members: campaigns and elections (U.S., Spanish, and general), research methodology, agenda-setting and other

media effects, and a conveniently named catch-all devoted to "Other Topics." The papers, of course, ranged from determinedly quantitative to informal comments generated more or less spontaneously on the spot. Discussion was lively, occasionally intense, always enlightening.

Delegates from more northerly climates found the Spanish clock interesting and sometimes a challenge: an early start, fortified with caffeine and sugar; a late lunch, fortified with considerable alcohol; then more work, and finally a leisurely dinner starting at a time when farmers and professors of the American Midwest might be in bed. The local cuisine of the Basque country of northern Spain – rich in seafood, vegetables and red wine – was featured in the meals and on display in receptions hosted by the university, the city, and the government of Navarra. In the splendid city hall, Hemingway wannabes made short work of a pile of red neckerchiefs, the traditional symbol of the running of the bulls, supplied by the mayor.

Two SUVs of participants stayed an extra day to join López-Escobar on a safari along the Atlantic coast of Biscay Bay. Included was a stop at the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao that can be described as spectacular on the outside and, well, different on the inside. What can you say about an exhibit of two steel rails laid in railway fashion on the floor? Or a painter described in the guide as devoting his career to white and represented by several large panels, all painted white, distinguishable from the gallery walls mostly by the texture of his brush strokes? The museum, soon to be reproduced in a larger version in Manhattan, is the anchor of a redevelopment project in the old industrial quarter of the city. It was the first stop in a day-long tour that included lunch overlooking the ocean and ended with a walk through the heart of a rainy but festively decorated San Sebastian.

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Note from the Editors:

The article by Phil Meyer on page 1 of the December newsletter was originally published on the op-ed page of USA TODAY for November 9, 2000, two days after the USA presidential election, and is copyrighted by USA TODAY.

President

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Long may this tradition continue!

I believe WAPOR fulfills a valuable role in all kinds of ways. For example, at the time of writing, Mahar Mangahas is leading efforts to prevent the government of the Philippines from introducing legislation that will ban the publication of surveys 15 days before the elections – a bill that threatens the freedom of speech, information and democracy in that country; we regularly bring together people from all over the world with shared interests and objectives, providing a forum for the exchange of professional and academic research; and we publish a fine journal, the International Journal of Public Opinion Research, of which we can be proud. And, of course, WAPOR should represent and be the champion of high professional standards and ethical practices in the field of public opinion research.

I have much to look forward to over the next two years, including seeing as many WAPOR members as possible at our annual conference in Rome in September. Following the excitement and uncertainties of the US elections, there will be particularly close scrutiny of polls and the media in the elections due to take place in several countries this year.

But the most important task for me is to achieve the five goals I have set out for the term of my presidency. Not in any order of importance, these goals are:

1. ***To increase membership*** – this will boost revenue, and make us a stronger, more vibrant organisation as more people become involved in our activities
2. ***To build links with other organisations*** – thereby increasing our profile, widening our relevance and positioning us as an influential international player within the wider worlds of communications and the social sciences.
3. ***To increase the number of seminars and conferences around the world*** – these are an essential part of our Association's life-blood. It is important that these take place not just in the traditional venues of Europe and North America, but across the world, reflecting and enhancing our internationalism.
4. ***To reinforce WAPOR's commitment to quality and high ethical standards*** - this is more relevant now than ever as we are facing a time when the profession is under threat from cheap, poor quality "research" (sic) and low standards of reporting. It is our responsibility to continue to uphold the letter and spirit of WAPOR's code of ethics and practices and to act with professionalism and integrity.
5. ***To communicate more effectively both with members and with the wider world*** – the includes a re-design and development of our website, keeping it up-to-date with information about our conferences and seminars, and the support and services we offer our members, together with references to papers, articles and findings.

I have a challenging time ahead and the legacy of some great predecessors to live up to. With the support of a strong

Council, which met on 5 March to plan our activities and priorities for 2001-2, and the active participation of members, we will successfully meet these challenges. Watch this space!

Regional WAPOR Conference in Pamplona Spain

By Claes de Vreese

The year 2000 will go down in history books as an eventful year in terms of campaigns and elections. Internationally, most attention was probably devoted to the lengthy US presidential election, but other important national elections took place in such different regions of the world as Spain, Mexico, Egypt, and Peru. This made the November 2000 regional WAPOR conference on 'The Role of Public Opinion and Media in Elections' exceptionally well timed.

More than 60 participants from several continents joined the three day conference, hosted by Universidad de Navarra in the Northern region of Spain. The program devoted attention to the recent national elections in Spain, Egypt, the U.S., Chile, and Peru. In a roundtable, the role of pollsters was discussed under the heading of 'Successes and Failures of Electoral Polls' that featured speakers from several countries. A panel session included four research papers shedding new light on the agenda-setting process during campaigns in the US, Mexico, and Chile. Another panel session was devoted to papers on public opinion theory and measurement. The final panel session dealt specifically with media effects on political attitudes and behavior. The papers in this last session dealt with the role of media during general election campaigns in the US, Britain, and New Zealand and a national referendum in Denmark.

In addition to the stimulating academic program, host Esteban Lopez-Escobar provided an enticing social program. This included an opening night dinner party in an exclusive gastronomic club, generous lunches at the University's exceptional restaurant, and a special visit to the Mayor of Pamplona and the city's Town Hall, the starting point for the annual run of the bulls.

Both the academic and the social program were truly 'WAPOR spirited'. The emphasis was on world/ international events and elections, and the audience was international too. The wonderful cuisine and exceptional Navarra wines added to the warmth and friendliness that appears to be a WAPOR trademark. The full program and papers can be obtained by request to Maria-Teresa Sadaba, email msadaba@unav.es

Claes de Vreese
The Amsterdam School of Communications Research
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Fixing the U.S. Election Polling Problems Means Fixing Election Problems

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There *were* problems with the Florida exit poll. At the end of the night, the vote totals in the exit poll sample of precincts did not represent the vote cast statewide.

And the statistical model – through a quirk in the process where a comparison election is chosen based on the highest correlation with past Republican precinct vote – chose the 1998 Florida Governor race won by George W. Bush’s brother Jeb. Because of that choice, the model assumed that only about 8% of the total vote would be cast absentee. It turned out that the (un-interviewed and highly Republican) absentee

share of the vote was actually 12%. Had the model chosen the 1996 election – one with more absentee voters — for comparison, the Gore call would not have been made. Finally, by 7:50 p.m. there were enough precincts reporting actual votes to make comparisons between the exit poll results and the vote totals in individual precincts. In those precincts it appeared that, if anything, the exit poll had understated the Gore vote and overstated the Bush vote.

The Gore call was not made

simply off an exit poll – the other voting information strengthened the perception that Gore had carried the state of Florida.

The American electoral process is a decentralized one, even when it comes to the one office elected by voters nationwide. There are 51 separate elections (in each of the 50 states plus the District of Columbia) where “electors” are selected, and victory goes to the ticket that wins at least 270 of the 538 total electoral votes (one for every member of congress plus the three allocated to the District of Columbia). States set their own rules – from the times the polls open and close, to which candidates appear on the ballot (and the order they appear), to the type of equipment used for voting and the rules for how people can get on the voter registration lists. States themselves pay to fund election under the rules they set and some, like Florida, leave many of the decisions (and the payment for them) to counties.

Consequently, different states close their polls and start reporting results at various times from 6 p.m. to midnight EST. They use different kinds of voting equipment, from mechanical voting machines that ceased being manufactured decades ago, to the latest in optical scanning, to touch-screen voting, to paper ballots, to computer cards that require voters to punch holes in them with older (but cheap) mechanisms. We now know that these methods are not all equally accurate. For instance in Florida, Palm Beach County could create the

infamous “Butterfly ballot” and in Duval County an election book could contain an instruction (“vote on every page”) that, when scrupulously followed, resulted in an invalid vote for President.

The early morning call of Florida, and therefore the country, for Bush was in part a casualty of this diversity. By 2 a.m. about 97% of all precincts in Florida had reported their votes. Volusia County – where Daytona Beach is located – was one of the punch card voting counties. As in many other counties like this, the computer cards are transported to a central location where they are counted using a vote-tabulation program. Shortly after midnight, the addition of a single precinct – Precinct 216 in DeLand – added hundreds of votes to Bush’s total, while *subtracting* 16,022 from Al Gore’s. This programming mistake wasn’t corrected until after the television networks made their Florida call for Bush. When it and other counting errors were discovered, it became clear that the Florida election – and therefore the U.S. presidential election – was truly still too close to call.

Now, months after the election, and after a congressional committee has called news presidents to testify at its investigation of the network calls, it is clear that there are many challenges to election day polling in the United States, and that procedures that have worked in the past may not work much longer. The way Americans vote has changed and will continue to change. Florida’s absentee vote total (12%) is dwarfed by the 20% to 30% share of votes cast absentee or through early voting in Texas, California, Hawaii, Colorado, Tennessee and Arizona. In Washington State, half the ballots are mailed in. In Oregon, you can now vote *only* by mail or by bringing your mail ballot to a drop-off point.

People are voting earlier and in ways that can’t be measured in an election day exit poll. They must be interviewed separately by telephone in the days immediately preceding the election. There needs to be additional research into issues of sampling, interviewing, and modeling. And this year congress may actually adopt a uniform poll closing standard – ending voting in federal elections at the same time nationwide. (It is not clear that the Bush administration supports such a measure.)

But in 2004, the U.S. news media will face a more specific problem, retrieving lost credibility when it comes to election night projections. As the events that followed election night made clear, there are many possible national and local procedural election fixes. But the false expectation of precision claimed for exit polls and election night calls may be gone for good.

Dr. Kathleen Frankovic
CBS News

*The way
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WAPOR ANNUAL CONFERENCE - CALL FOR PAPERS

Rome, Italy

September 20-22, 2001

The World Association for Public Opinion Research will hold its annual conference in September 2001 in Rome, Italy. WAPOR seeks proposals for panels and papers to be presented at this conference. Papers submitted by graduate students will be considered for the price for the 'best student paper'. We welcome proposals on the following themes as well as on other topics that may be of interest to WAPOR members.

- q Elections around the world
- q Methodology
- q Internet and survey research
- q The role of the Internet in the public opinion process
- q Public opinion theory
- q Media impact on public opinion
- q Polls and the media
- q Public opinion on social, economic, and political issues

Proposals should include an abstract in which you give a general description of the paper (research question, methods and anticipated results), along with complete information on the authors on a separate sheet (mailing address, e-mail address and telephone number for each co-author or participant). The abstract should not exceed 750 words.



The deadline for the submissions is June 1st, 2001. Confirmation of receipt will be sent within two weeks, and the final decisions about the program will be made by the end of June. If your proposal is accepted we will expect the text of the full paper by August 1st, 2001.

**SEE INSERT FOR REGISTRATION
FORM**

Please send three copies of all panel and paper proposals to the Conference Chair at the address below:

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“Media Content Analysis and Survey Research”

A WAPOR Thematic Seminar

in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (German Society for Journalism and Communication Research, or DGPK)

June 21 – 23, 2001

“The White House,” Hamburg, Germany

Registration

Please return to:
WAPOR Secretariat
UNL Gallup Research Center
200 N Eleventh Street
Lincoln, NE 68588-0241
USA
Fax: 001 (402) 458-2038

Thereby register for the WAPOR-Seminar, “Media Content Analysis and Survey Research.”

Name:

Organization/Institute:

Address:

Country:

Telephone: Fax: E-mail:

	Price per person	Number of persons	Total
- Seminar fee, including meals and accommodations, for WAPOR or DGPK members	\$380	\$.....
- Seminar fee, including meals and accommodations, for non-members	\$480	\$.....
- Accompanying persons: meals and accommodations only	\$260	\$.....
- Extra day: departure June 24, 2000	\$130	\$.....
Total			\$.....

Seminar participants will be accommodated at the “White House” or a nearby hotel. The price includes all meals (breakfast at the guest house/hotel, lunch and dinner at the conference center), and the get-together on June 21!!

Method of payment (A processing charge of \$5.00 will be added for credit card payments):

Mastercard:

EXP:

Signature:

VISA:

EXP:

Signature:

Check enclosed in USD (**no** Eurochecks please!)

Please check our website at www.wapor.org for further details.

Calendar

Rome, Italy, September 20-22, 2001

Title: "Media and Public Opinion in Democracies"

Call for papers: Deadline for submissions is June 1st, 2001

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Conference Reminders

Hamburg Germany, June 21-23, 2001

Title: "Survey Research and Media Content Analysis"

(See previous page for registration form.)

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