

# Too Close to Call? Uncertainty and Bias in Election-Night Reporting\*

Joseph E. Uscinski, *University of Arizona*

*Objective.* Previous research has found that early election-night projections can have a depressing effect on turnout in presidential elections. Although this effect has been found to be small in the past, it may be enough to sway state outcomes and, potentially, the final outcomes of close presidential and other elections. Therefore, this article analyzes the election-night presidential projections of the three major cable news networks in 2000 and 2004 to examine the forces that lead to the timing of election-night calls. *Method.* I collect the on-air projection times of the cable news networks from videotapes, transcripts, and network documents. I apply duration analysis, specifically Cox models, to examine the forces that lead networks to make projections when they do. *Results.* Results of duration analysis indicate that while the cable networks timed their state-by-state projections primarily on the competitiveness of the state presidential races, network competition appears to drive projections at the beginning of election night. Furthermore, I find that early in the night in 2000, the cable networks appeared to call states sooner for Al Gore than for George W. Bush when controlling for the competitiveness of the state presidential races. *Conclusions.* This article provides support for Republican allegations of biased election-night projections in 2000. However, it appears that because the networks amended their election-night procedures, there were no miscalls or differences in how cable networks called states for the two presidential candidates in 2004.

By calling the Al Gore states early and delaying the calls on the George W. Bush states you receive a picture of America believing that Al Gore was sweeping the country and George W. Bush was having trouble carrying his states.<sup>1</sup>  
Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-La. November 16, 2000

I state categorically there was no intentional bias in the election night reporting.<sup>2</sup>  
Tom Johnson, CNN Chairman November 16, 2000

The aftermath of the 2000 election-night coverage led to open accusations of television network bias and inaccuracy (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson,

\*Direct correspondence to Joe Uscinski, 315 Social Sciences, Tucson, AZ 85721 (Uscinski@email.arizona.edu). For those wishing to replicate this study, data and coding information may be obtained from the author. The author acknowledges Bradford Jones and Bill Mishler for their support in the completion of this project. The author is also grateful to Laura Langer, Kristin Kanthak, Barbara Norrander, Chad Westerland, Erin Leahey, and the anonymous reviewers for comments on previous drafts and to Farrah Green for her assistance in data collection. Any errors remain the fault of the author.

<sup>1</sup> CBS News (2000).

<sup>2</sup> CBS News (2000).

2001; CBS News, 2000). Election-night projections are of concern because evidence suggests that early projections of state outcomes can shape other states' outcomes by depressing turnout (Delli Carpini, 1984; Jackson, 1983; Lott, 2005; Sudman, 1986). Therefore, the timing of projections is fundamental not only to the study of media, but also to the study of elections. Ideally, the timing of projections should be based on the certainty with which a network can make an accurate call (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001). If other forces affect the timing of projections, then those forces should be investigated due to their potential impact on election outcomes. This article studies the election-night projections of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections to examine the forces that affect the timing of networks' official state projections. Specifically, I explore the effect of supposed biases on cable news networks' election-night projections controlling for the competitiveness of the states.

I find that the strongest predictor of network call times is how tightly contested, or competitive, a state appears to be. However, I also find support for claims accusing networks of making state projections more quickly for the Democratic candidate, Al Gore. In addition, I find that the networks stalled in their state-by-state projections in 2004 when the accurate calling of another state would have forced the projection of a national winner. I detail election-night coverage and the accusations of bias that subsequently followed. I then examine call times using duration analysis of data collected from the 2000 and 2004 CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC broadcasts. To conclude, I discuss how the 2000 election-night coverage may have affected networks.

## **Election Night**

On election night, all the networks have access to the same preelection polling data, exit-poll data, and precinct returns,<sup>3</sup> yet make state-by-state projections at, in some cases, widely varying times. This suggests that forces other than state competitiveness may affect a network's behavior; however, scant research exists on the timing of election-night projections. Researchers have examined the accuracy of the statistical and polling methods employed by media outlets to project winners (Busch and Lieske, 1985; Freeman, 2004; Ladd, 1996; Levy, 1983; Mitofsky, 1998:247) and the legalistic and normative implications of election projections, exit polls, and television news coverage (Milavsky et al., 1985; Joslyn, Ross, and Weinstein, 1984). Following 2000, researchers studied the effect of election projections on elite discourse in the media (Jamieson and Waldman, 2002). Scholarly attention has generally focused on the influence of exit polls (Sudman, 1986), early projections (Jackson, 1983; Delli Carpini, 1984; Lott, 2005), and

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/misc/projected.html> for a detailed explanation of how the networks gathered and shared data and of network projection procedures.

last-minute political programming (Hoffstetter and Buss, 1980; Lott, 2005) on voter turnout. Such studies point to a subtle media effect that includes, in certain circumstances, a depression of voter turnout that may not have affected outcomes. However, these studies examined contests in which outcomes were rather lopsided (such as 1980). The importance of the current study lies in the closeness of the two presidential contests it examines, 2000 and 2004. Although prior research (Jackson, 1983; Delli Carpini, 1984; Sudman, 1986; Tuchman and Coffin, 1971) suggests that election-night media affects turnout slightly, this effect is an important one in the two races studied here. In both 2000 and 2004, it would have taken only 1 percent of the vote in a few states to change the tides of history, and studies find that the early and inaccurate calls in 2000 may have decreased votes in Florida by as many as 10,000 (Lott, 2005). If the media can depress turnout with projections, then we should examine the impartiality of projection times.

It was not until the aftermath of the 2000 election that researchers paid attention to the actual timing of projections (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001; see also Norrander, Sigelman, and Jones, n.d.). The networks faced intense criticism from the public and from Congress regarding the incorrect and ill-timed projections on election night 2000, causing them to undertake their own investigations into the projection mishaps (e.g., Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001). These investigations suggested that the missed calls were due to “excessive speed, combined with overconfidence in experts and a reliance on increasingly dubious polls” (Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001:1). Although both these studies discounted accusations of bias in network projections, they lacked an appropriate analysis for making such claims.<sup>4</sup> So while the network-commissioned studies are informative, no statistically rigorous studies have yet tested the factors that influence the timing of election-night projections.

### **Accusations of Bias**

Election night 2000 demonstrated serious problems not only in this nation’s voting system, but also in the media’s coverage.<sup>5</sup> Although Florida’s

<sup>4</sup>See Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg (2001:Appx. 4). Their conclusion of no bias is based on a sample of only 20 states and employs only an “eyeball” technique of examination. No rigorous methods are used.

<sup>5</sup>Projection errors occurred before 2000. CBS encountered criticism of its call of the 1964 California Republican primary before the polls had closed. This resulted in networks employing their own exit polls and “decision desks” through 1988. In 1990, the networks and the Associated Press entered into a consortium, Voter News Service (VNS), to make projections. In 1994, ABC hired its own consultants to project winners in states deemed “too close to call.” Reacting to ABC’s advantage, other networks followed, making their own projections. Despite skewed poll results and a missed call in 1996, this system worked well until 2000 (Erikson and Tedin, 2005; Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Mitofsky, 1998).

electoral votes were disputed until five weeks after the election, the television networks declared both major candidates winners in Florida at different times on election night.<sup>6</sup> While much attention was paid to Florida, mishaps also included a tenuous call for Gore in New Mexico (the state did not declare a winner until December 5) and noncalls by some networks for Wisconsin, Oregon, Arkansas, and Iowa.

Due to the dubious projections, many questioned the accuracy of the networks' election-night decision desks. Rep. Billy Tauzin (R-LA) accused the networks of intentionally discouraging voters through the timing of projections (CBS News, 2000). Tauzin, along with many conservative pundits, asserted that the networks called states quickly for Al Gore while delaying calls for George W. Bush (Huff, 2000). Representatives on the House Energy and Commerce Committee also questioned network news executives about bias and inaccuracy. Some accused networks of intentionally calling Florida for Gore before polls had closed to depress turnout in the Republican-dominated Florida panhandle (Will, 2000). Many wondered why Florida was called quickly for Gore, while states with Bush margins such as Ohio and West Virginia were called much later by networks (Yardley and Cooper, 2000).

Under intense pressure, the networks initiated internal investigations into election night 2000 and offered numerous prescriptions for handling future elections. These included curbing the pressures of network competition, better explaining the projection process to the public, and relying less on single sources of turnout and vote data (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001).

### **The Forces that May Affect Call Times**

When the polls close in a given state, the networks have several potential sources of data, including exit polls, preelection polls, and the voting history of the state. Projections made at poll closing will stem from these sources and not from the real determinant of election outcomes—votes. After polls close, more information is available as precincts report vote tallies. The longer networks wait to project, the more votes are counted, giving networks more information and certainty with which to broadcast projections. Eventually, all of a state's precincts report, eliminating uncertainty.

Networks, like other news organizations, face competitive pressure to "break the story" (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001). Historically, networks have attempted to increase their audience share by making projections sooner than the other networks. Therefore, networks are forced

<sup>6</sup>See Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson (2001:12, 16–25). This CBS report provides an analysis of the Florida calls. VNS and the networks began calling Gore the winner at 7:48 p.m. EST, 12 minutes before polls closed in eastern Florida and an hour before they closed in the panhandle. VNS retracted this call at 10:16 p.m. and the networks declared Bush the winner at 2:16 a.m. This call was retracted at 4 a.m.

to balance the uncertainty of making an accurate call with the competition of making the first call. Networks are in the business of making projections on election night; therefore, they “burn to be the best and to be first” (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001:15). To be the “best and the first,” networks must not only make correct projections, but also make them as soon as possible so as to outpace competing networks. Uncertainty, however, aggravates network decision making.

Media outlets strive for accuracy and timeliness; however, numerous recent studies have found evidence to suggest the existence of media bias (e.g., Farnsworth and Lichter, 2003; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Groeling and Kernell, 1998). Outlets may bias, or slant, their news coverage for several reasons. The first explanation, and most commonly cited, contends that journalists (e.g., Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter, 1986) and media executives (e.g., Gilens and Hertzman, 2000) are not ideologically representative of the population and will therefore report news tainted with their ideological predispositions. The second explanation looks to economic aspects, contending that media firms are acting in their best interest to slant their coverage to appeal to segments of a heterogeneous audience (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2004). The third explanation contends that news firms may demonstrate incumbent or challenger biases. An incumbent bias gives the incumbent candidate or party the benefit of the doubt because they are already in office, while a challenger bias gives the challenger overly positive coverage because an upset provides more exciting news. A fourth possible explanation for bias is that media firms are reliant on sources (exit polls, vote tallies, polling history) for information; if those sources are somehow inaccurate, then the projections will be inaccurate as well. Although these explanations of media bias are plausible and may explain whatever bias may occur on election night, they are difficult to parcel out from each other using observational studies. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine the cause of bias should it occur. It is, however, within the scope of this study to determine if one candidate is favored over another in the timing of election-night calls.

To be precise in definition, this article operationalizes election-night bias as the broadcasting of state projections faster for one candidate than for another, when controlling for the competitiveness of the state races. Furthermore, findings suggesting networks called states faster for one candidate, controlling for competitiveness, do not indicate on their own that the networks purposefully delayed or hastened calls for a candidate, or that network ideological biases played any role in determining projection times. Therefore, a finding of bias in election-night call times does not speak to the cause of such bias, but merely to its existence.

## **Data**

I designed the following study to investigate how networks projected states for presidential candidates. Given that national preelection polls of the

2000 and 2004 presidential elections were similarly and evenly divided, these elections provide an ideal sample to study the forces that affect projection times. In explaining the factors that influence projection times, the dependent variable of interest in this study is time-to-call, or, how long it takes networks to project a presidential winner for a state after its polls close. I collected the data by time coding videotapes of network coverage and supplementing the results with the networks' online results and program transcripts where available.<sup>7</sup> Time is measured as the number of minutes from the official time that the polls close in a state to the time that the network officially projected the state's winner.<sup>8</sup> For both elections, the study ended mid-morning the day after each election.<sup>9</sup>

I limit the investigation to the three major cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) for two reasons. First, because of the unexpected length of the 2004 election-night coverage (about 21 hours until all states were projected), I do not have reliable videotape data for ABC. This jeopardizes the generalizability of the findings to the broadcast networks; however, CNN and CBS share a call desk on election night and have identical call times, as do MSNBC and NBC. Therefore, even without ABC, these findings are generalizable to two of the three broadcast networks.<sup>10</sup> Second, because of the polarized ideological reputations of CNN and Fox News, the cable networks in this study provide an appropriate sample from which to draw conclusions.

## Dependent Variable

I measure time-to-call in minutes from poll closing.<sup>11</sup> Due to the number of minutes in the study (600 is our largest observation in 2000 and 1,162 is our largest observation in 2004), I arrange the data in state-network format. In this structure, each state (and Washington, DC) has three entries, one for Fox News, one for MSNBC, and one for CNN. I constructed separate data

<sup>7</sup>I also relied on the Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson and Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg studies, along with several online sources, to construct and verify the data for election night 2000.

<sup>8</sup>In 2000, there were several miscalls and retractions by the networks. I use only the initial call made by the networks. If there is going to be bias present, it will be in the first call made for the state, and not in subsequent calls and retractions where actual vote tallies will have more influence.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore, the data exhibit some right-censoring as several states were not projected until the next day for 2004, and not for several weeks or at all in 2000. In 2004, states called after our censoring times were, in fact, called after the concession and victory speeches, which relegated further state projections trivial.

<sup>10</sup>With this said, having examined the portion of the ABC data that I was able to collect and verify, I find nothing to indicate that ABC acted in a way that would contradict the results provided in this article.

<sup>11</sup>This is because networks have agreed not to project states until after the polls in the state close.

TABLE 1  
 Variability in Duration Times Across All States in 2000 and 2004

| Minutes-to-Call | Frequency of Cases in 2000 | Frequency of Cases in 2004 |
|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1-5             | 88                         | 83                         |
| 6-30            | 8                          | 5                          |
| 31-60           | 14                         | 2                          |
| 61-90           | 8                          | 8                          |
| 91-120          | 6                          | 11                         |
| 121+            | 29                         | 44                         |
|                 | 153 Total                  | 153 Total                  |

sets for 2000 and 2004. Therefore, each data set contains 153 cases. As the dependent variable measures the passage of time, this study employs Cox duration models.<sup>12</sup> Because of the structure of the data, and because time is treated as continuous, as opposed to discretized, I employ a continuous time application of event-history analysis.

Table 1 summarizes the variability in duration times across state-network observations. In both years of this study, we can see that more than half the calls made by networks are made within five minutes of the official poll closing time of the state. Conversely, about a third of the calls are made more than two hours after the state’s polls have closed. This indicates that while the networks make most of their projections within a few minutes of poll closing, many states are not called by networks until long after voting has ended.

To demonstrate the wide variation in call times across networks, I present in Tables 2 and 3 the call times for selected states. The states presented are intended only to give the reader a flavor of variation in the data, and are not intended to represent a random sample. Minutes to projection is the number of minutes from poll closing to the projection by a network. Table 2 shows selected states from 2000 and Table 3 shows states from 2004. The projected winner of these states is in parentheses.

Notice that in 2000 (Table 2), Fox News made its projection of Arizona almost an hour after CNN and MSNBC. In the case of Nevada, CNN projected a winner about two hours before the other two networks. In West Virginia, Fox News projected a winner more than an hour before CNN and MSNBC. In Table 3 (2004), CNN projected Arizona three and one-half hours after the official poll closing time, while MSNBC and Fox News took

<sup>12</sup>The Cox proportional hazards model, unlike the parametric alternatives, does not impose a distributional assumption for the shape of the hazard rates. Because I specify survival time as a function of theoretically relevant covariates, the question of time dependency becomes a nuisance rather than a variable of interest (see Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004). I employ the Efron method for tied data (Efron, 1977).

**TABLE 2**  
**Variability in Network Call Times for Selected States in 2000**

| State                | Network  | Minutes to Projection |
|----------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| Arizona (Bush)       | CNN      | 166                   |
|                      | MSNBC    | 172                   |
|                      | Fox News | 215                   |
| Colorado (Bush)      | CNN      | 192                   |
|                      | MSNBC    | 135                   |
|                      | Fox News | 136                   |
| Minnesota (Gore)     | CNN      | 36                    |
|                      | MSNBC    | 30                    |
|                      | Fox News | 88                    |
| Nevada (Bush)        | CNN      | 80                    |
|                      | MSNBC    | 205                   |
|                      | Fox News | 195                   |
| New Hampshire (Bush) | CNN      | 184                   |
|                      | MSNBC    | 185                   |
|                      | Fox News | 313                   |
| New Mexico (Gore)    | CNN      | 82                    |
|                      | MSNBC    | 44                    |
|                      | Fox News | 334                   |
| Tennessee (Bush)     | CNN      | 76                    |
|                      | MSNBC    | 91                    |
|                      | Fox News | 143                   |
| West Virginia (Bush) | CNN      | 161                   |
|                      | MSNBC    | 163                   |
|                      | Fox News | 87                    |

only about two hours to make that projection. Similarly, both CNN and MSNBC projected California within five minutes of the poll closing, while Fox took more than an hour to make the call. Taken together, Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate that the networks varied widely in the time it took them to make certain projections.

### **Covariates**

To isolate the three networks of interest in this study, I create dummy variables for each of the three cable news networks: CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. To test if the cable news networks as a whole call states faster for one candidate than for another, I created a dummy variable distinguishing projections in favor of George W. Bush (1), from calls for Al Gore (0) in our 2000 data set and John Kerry (0) in our 2004 data set. If a “pro-Democratic candidate” bias played a role in the timing of projections, then networks should project states for the Democratic candidate (Gore or Kerry) more quickly than states for Bush, when controlling for other factors.



TABLE 3  
 Variability in Network Call Times for Selected States in 2004

| State                    | Network  | Minutes to Projection |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| Arizona (Bush)           | CNN      | 209                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 108                   |
|                          | Fox News | 137                   |
| Arkansas (Bush)          | CNN      | 195                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 97                    |
|                          | Fox News | 100                   |
| California (Kerry)       | CNN      | 5                     |
|                          | MSNBC    | 1                     |
|                          | Fox News | 78                    |
| Michigan (Kerry)         | CNN      | 208                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 518                   |
|                          | Fox News | 324                   |
| Minnesota (Kerry)        | CNN      | 343                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 450                   |
|                          | Fox News | 278                   |
| Mississippi (Bush)       | CNN      | 92                    |
|                          | MSNBC    | 86                    |
|                          | Fox News | 116                   |
| South Carolina (Bush)    | CNN      | 102                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 92                    |
|                          | Fox News | 70                    |
| Washington State (Kerry) | CNN      | 153                   |
|                          | MSNBC    | 1                     |
|                          | Fox News | 4                     |

Such a situation would lead to a negative coefficient. Likewise, if a “pro-Republican candidate” bias manifested itself across the networks, Bush states would be called sooner than Democratic states, leading to a positive coefficient.<sup>13</sup>

The competitiveness of the state presidential contests aggravates the timing of network projections by decreasing the likelihood that a projection will be correct until more information is collected, that is, the closer the contest, the longer networks should take to project. To control for this, I include a measure of competitiveness (COMPETITIVENESS), which is based on preelection poll results from the states and provides a continuous measure of

<sup>13</sup>This variable assumes that the cable networks *all* called states with the same bias. I tested other models employing interactions to assess if the networks had differing biases, such as Fox News leaning more conservative or CNN leaning more liberal. The interactions in these models did not yield significant effects; therefore, I choose to present the models as shown in Tables 4 and 6 for ease in interpreting the main effects. Also, this variable may speak to incumbent and/or challenger biases. For example, hastened Bush calls in 2004 may indicate incumbent bias while quicker calls for Kerry may indicate challenger bias.

the closeness of the state presidential races.<sup>14</sup> To calculate this measure, I subtracted third party and undecided voters from the poll total. I recalculated the percent of Bush and Gore (Kerry) supporters by this new total. With these recalculated percents I calculated an “effective candidates” figure by dividing 1 by  $[(\% \text{ BUSH SUPPORT squared}) + (\% \text{ DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE SUPPORT squared})]$ . The figure has a hypothetical range from 1.0 to 2.0, with values near 2.0 signaling greater COMPETITIVENESS and values near 1.0 indicating states leaning toward one candidate.<sup>15</sup>

Because I do not have access to the data that the cable network decision desks had, or at what time they had them, I must estimate this information. The COMPETITIVENESS measure reflects my best unbiased estimate of the information they had on election night. Therefore, this measure is the best estimator not only of actual competitiveness, but also of the information that the decision desks had to work with.

## Results

The models in Tables 4 and 6 show results for continuous time Cox regression analysis. I present the parameter coefficients; exponentiation provides the hazard ratios. Robust standard errors are presented to account for clustering on the states. In the models below, predictor variables with significant coefficients should be interpreted as affecting the length of time it takes networks to make a projection, and not whether a network makes a projection. As such, positive coefficients denote that the “hazard rate” is increasing (i.e., the time-to-call is decreasing) with changes in the covariate, while negative coefficients imply that the hazard is decreasing (time-to-call is increasing) with changes in the covariate (see Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004:59). In other words, positive coefficients indicate that increases in the covariate lead to quicker calls, while negative coefficients lead to relatively delayed calls.

Table 4 explains projection times on election night 2000 and 2004 for all states and Washington, DC. Schoenfeld residual tests indicate that these

<sup>14</sup>Exit-polling data play a key role in determining the timing of projections. Although the availability of such raw data would allow us to control for their effect, such are not currently available (see Freeman, 2004). The data for these two measures come from ([www.electoral-vote.com](http://www.electoral-vote.com)) and (<http://www.engles.net/election.htm>). Electoral-Vote provides averaged poll data by state for the month leading up to the election. The Engles website provides poll numbers just before the 2000 election. The poll numbers on these sites stem from private polling houses, university, and media outlet polls. For 2000, poll results stem from just prior to the election to control for the effect that the Bush “drunk driving revelation” had on the public. See Steger, Hickman, and Yohn (2002) for a discussion of the effective candidates measure.

<sup>15</sup>For 2004, the values in our data range from 1.27 in Washington, DC, which strongly favored John Kerry in averaged preelection polls, to 2.0 in New Mexico, a state evenly split in preelection polls. For 2000, the values range from 1.37, Washington, DC to 2.0, Maine and New Mexico.

**TABLE 4**  
 Cox Duration Model Explaining Time-to-Call on Election Nights 2000 and 2004

|                 | Data Sets for Entire Night |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
|                 | 2000                       | 2004                 |
| CNN             | 0.072<br>(0.055)           | - 0.055<br>(0.084)   |
| Fox News        | - 0.034<br>(0.059)         | 0.106**<br>(0.048)   |
| Competitiveness | - 3.77***<br>(1.00)        | - 2.61***<br>(0.893) |
| Bush projection | 0.197<br>(0.287)           | - 0.049<br>(0.283)   |
| Log-likelihood  | - 600.83                   | - 592.54             |
| <i>N</i>        | 153                        | 153                  |

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

NOTE: Robust standard errors presented in parentheses. Results are of two-tailed test.

models satisfy the proportional hazards assumption inherent in the Cox model. The coefficients for COMPETITIVENESS, - 3.77 in 2000 and - 2.61 in 2004, are statistically significant and indicate that the cable networks call competitive states more slowly than they do noncompetitive states. For 2000, hazard ratios, calculated by exponentiation, indicate that between states united for one candidate and those divided evenly between the two candidates is a difference in hazard of 98 percent. In other words, for each percentage point a state’s race tightens, it is called about 2 percent slower by the cable networks. For 2004, there is a similar 93 percent difference between evenly divided and united states. As expected, the competitiveness of the states led to drastic delays in time-to-call in both election years; however, in 2004 competitiveness is a slightly less potent predictor.

Table 4 also demonstrates the relationships between the networks on election night. Although not significant to reliable standards, we see that in 2000 CNN was relatively faster than the omitted category MSNBC and that Fox News appears the slowest of the three networks. In 2004, this relationship reverses, with Fox News calling states 11 percent faster (coefficient of 0.106) than the omitted category MSNBC and CNN appearing the slowest, although statistically insignificant. Therefore, between 2000 and 2004, there is a changing relationship between CNN and Fox in how they time their calls. This may signal Fox’s attempt to outpace the competing networks throughout the night.

In Table 4, the BUSH PROJECTION coefficients in both models are insignificant. This demonstrates that throughout the entirety of both election nights, the networks as a whole did not time projections based on which candidate the state was leaning toward. Therefore, these models show

no indication of bias in favor of any candidate. Although there appears little evidence in Table 4 to suggest candidate bias on the part of the cable networks over the entirety of the states called, there is reason to suggest that if such a bias exists, it should manifest in calls for those states whose polls close the earliest. For this reason, I again examine the 2000 and 2004 data in Table 6 by running separate models for states whose polls close before and after 9 p.m. EST.

A bias may occur at the beginning of the night for several reasons. It may stem from news organizations attempting to influence those yet to vote in states with later closing times, or from newsrooms calling states with their ideological “blindness” on at the beginning of the night, before concrete vote tallies make apparent a winner. Also, news firms may attempt to appease a segment of the news market wishing to hear news favorable to their candidate at the beginning of the night. In addition, bias may occur due to networks acting favorably toward the incumbent or toward the challenger. Finally, such a bias may also stem from skewed information, such as faulty exit polls, which the networks use to make projections before vote tallies are processed. Of course, in any of these situations, as the night progresses and vote tallies are reported, networks eventually must return to reporting facts, as they are no longer called on to make projections.

I divide the data sets by poll closing times at 9 p.m. EST for several reasons. First, in 2000, networks became aware of problems in their projections around 9 p.m. EST (see Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001 for detailed timelines of network newsroom activity on that night). As vote totals from the Florida panhandle were tallied, networks became acutely aware of problems with their exit-polling results, including their early prediction of Florida for Al Gore. A reading of the transcripts and reports from 2000 indicate that VNS and the networks changed their modus operandi around this time. Second, dividing at this time allows us to examine how the networks called states when polls were still open elsewhere. In other words, choosing this time allows us to examine how networks call states when there is the possibility of influencing outcomes. Finally, this division gives roughly equal, though smaller, samples for analysis. Table 5 shows the breakdown of calls between the candidates before and after 9 p.m. to demonstrate that the data in each of the models in

TABLE 5

Distribution of Calls Between Candidates Before and After 9 p.m.

|      | Before 9 p.m. |       | After 9 p.m. |       |
|------|---------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| 2000 | Bush          | Gore  | Bush         | Gore  |
|      | 54            | 33    | 36           | 30    |
| 2004 | Bush          | Kerry | Bush         | Kerry |
|      | 48            | 33    | 45           | 27    |

Table 6 are representative of the complete sets in terms the distribution of calls for each candidate.

In 2000, Bush received a total of 90 calls by the cable networks in his favor (winning 30 states) and Al Gore received 63 (winning 20 states plus Washington, DC). Before 9 p.m. in 2000, Bush received 54 calls by the three networks, and Gore received 33. In 2004, Bush received 93 calls by the three networks (31 states) and Kerry received 60 (19 states and Washington, DC). Therefore, the data in each of the truncated sets are similar to the whole sets in terms of distribution of calls.<sup>16</sup>

Table 6 presents results for states closing before and after 9 p.m. for both 2000 and 2004. This technique demonstrates that networks changed how they projected states throughout the night. Looking at the *COMPETITIVENESS* measure, it has a lesser effect for states whose polls close before 9 p.m. than for those whose polls close later. The estimates before 9 p.m. are  $-2.09$  and  $-1.30$  for 2000 and 2004, respectively. After 9 p.m. they increase to  $-7.45$  and  $-8.51$ . This represents a 12 percent and 26 percent difference between states before and after 9 p.m. in the hazard ratios for 2000 and 2004, respectively. This indicates that at the beginning of election night, networks make calls with slightly less regard to state competitiveness as compared to at the end of the night. As election night goes on, the networks may worry less about network competition and base calls only on the state competitiveness. This is also reflected in the log-likelihood estimates, where the models reflecting states closing after 9 p.m. have a much better fit than the models of states closing before 9 p.m.

Table 6 also demonstrates that the network-specific effects changed between each election night. The estimates for Fox and CNN change little before and after 9 p.m. Therefore, the networks remained relatively stable in comparison to one another in 2000 throughout the night. In 2004, both Fox and CNN called states faster than MSNBC, with Fox News calling states a significant 24 percent faster and CNN an insignificant 5 percent faster. We see this relationship reverse at the end of the night in 2004, with both Fox and CNN slowing down in relation to MSNBC.

Most importantly in Table 6, the *BUSH PROJECTION* coefficient for states closing before 9 p.m. in 2000,  $-0.847$ , is negative and significant. This demonstrates that networks called states for Bush about 57 percent slower than states for Al Gore, when controlling for competitiveness. This shows that all three networks in this study called early closing states for Al Gore more quickly than for George W. Bush. This lends support to claims of media bias made after election night 2000. For states closing after 9 p.m. in 2000, networks appear to reverse this—the *BUSH PROJECTION* coefficient is positive, though insignificant. This makes intuitive sense, as it was around 9 p.m. that the networks learned that there were problems in their calls. In

<sup>16</sup>Though dividing the data sets and conducting separate analyses presents some methodological dangers, I present the analysis in this way for ease of interpretation.

TABLE 6  
Cox Duration Models Explaining Time-to-Call by Poll Closing Time

|                 | States Closing Before 9 p.m. |                     | States Closing After 9 p.m. |                    |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
|                 | 2000                         | 2004                | 2000                        | 2004               |
| CNN             | 0.112<br>(0.073)             | 0.052<br>(0.140)    | 0.106<br>(0.079)            | -0.183<br>(0.147)  |
| Fox News        | 0.040<br>(0.077)             | 0.215***<br>(0.073) | -0.094<br>(0.078)           | -0.002<br>(0.074)  |
| Competitiveness | -2.09**<br>(0.892)           | -1.30<br>(0.832)    | -7.45***<br>(2.42)          | -8.51***<br>(2.16) |
| Bush projection | -0.847**<br>(0.363)          | -0.331<br>(0.430)   | 0.501<br>(0.464)            | -0.429<br>(0.461)  |
| Log-likelihood  | -294.67                      | -274.06             | -195.18                     | -209.01            |
| N               | 87                           | 81                  | 66                          | 72                 |

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

NOTE: Robust standard errors presented in parentheses.

2004, Table 6 shows negative, though insignificant, effects for the BUSH PROJECTION coefficient, signifying that states were called equally for both candidates throughout the night. This may be the result of revised procedures and cautious network executives attempting to avoid a repeat of 2000.

### Other Findings

The most newsworthy projection of election night is not the projected winner of any state, but rather the national winner. Audiences tune in to see who will be the next president. In 2000, when the projection for Florida was changed from Gore to Bush, Bush was declared “triumphant” by the networks. This prompted Al Gore to concede the election to George W. Bush in a private phone call. However, shortly thereafter, the networks showed a shrinking Bush lead in Florida and took the state out of the Bush column. Following the lead of the networks, Gore retracted his concession in a second phone call to Bush (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001:19–24). Therefore, in 2000, the candidates followed the projections of the networks. In 2004, this relationship reverses. In 2004, the networks were reluctant to declare a national winner, thereby leaving the candidates to declare victory or concede without the media’s “calling” of the results first. In fact, the three cable networks came to a near stop when, because of the existing projected electoral count, any further projections in favor of Bush would have forced the projection of a national winner. This occurred between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. EST. The networks were so cautious that they waited until after the candidates acted, delaying some state and the national

projections until after the concession and victory speeches, even though almost all the precincts had reported in for those states.<sup>17</sup> This indicates a changing relationship between presidential candidates and networks on election night.<sup>18</sup>

Because several states and a national winner were not called until several hours after the Kerry concession, I suspect that forces beyond uncertainty and competitiveness affected calls. Fox News and MSNBC, having made a rather dubious call for Ohio early in the night with only 80 percent of precincts accounted for and many questions regarding provisional ballots still in the air, could have projected either Nevada or New Mexico, both with 95 percent of precincts counted and steady Bush leads. Why then did the cable networks refuse to project states that would have given Bush a projected victory?

I suggest that this “stalling” in 2004 was partially due to apprehension on the part of the networks stemming from the fear of facing additional scrutiny should they prematurely or incorrectly project a national winner as they did in 2000.<sup>19</sup> This, compounded with the uncertainty of a close national election, may have led the cable networks to hesitate in projecting states at the point when a national winner would be declared.

## **Conclusion**

Election-night projections are of concern because evidence suggests they can shape other states’ outcomes. This article examined the election-night projections of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, demonstrating that uncertainty, stemming from state competitiveness, is the best predictor of call times. However, the cable networks appear to make calls less on competitiveness at the beginning of the night than at the end. This may be due to network competition early in the broadcasts. This article also finds evidence of a pro-Gore bias early in the 2000 broadcast. Because this manifested itself early in broadcasts, it may have dissuaded voters still yet to vote.

This study is not designed to identify the causes of such bias; however, let me briefly offer some speculations. According to most popular accounts, and to recent scientific analyses (see, e.g., Groseclose and Milyo, 2005), Fox News slants conservatively and CNN liberally. However, Fox, like CNN

<sup>17</sup>When CNN made remaining projections on November 3, 99 percent of the votes were counted in those states.

<sup>18</sup>In 2000, the networks stalled in calling states at the end of the night whose outcomes were still in dispute. In 2004, the cable networks stalled at the point at which further projections would necessitate the projection of a national winner, regardless of the certainty of the outcome of the remaining states. For instance, with Ohio, Iowa, and New Mexico still uncalled, CNN stopped making projections at 5:30 a.m. on November 3.

<sup>19</sup>Networks may have delayed the call of a national winner to keep viewers tuned to extended coverage.

and MSNBC, appears to project states with a Gore slant in 2000. This may be because the networks relied on similar information. Exit-poll results are often, though not always, skewed in favor of the Democratic candidate (Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson, 2001; Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg, 2001; Ladd, 1996; Freeman, 2004). This may lead networks to unintentionally make biased calls that favor Democrats. However, in 2004, the cable networks may have placed less weight on exit polls due to their poor performance in 2000 and 2002. This may explain the lack of bias in 2004. Future research should continue to examine election-night practices as well as the effect of election-night media on election outcomes.

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