

Letters

Misunderstanding Television

To the Editor:

This letter is in response to the August 1984 *PS* article "Election Night News Coverage: The Limitations of Story Telling." As a former academic who has been associated for the past five years with one of the networks cited by the authors, I should like to make a few rebuttal comments.

I am moved to write because I believe there is a fundamental flaw in their analysis—a confusion between academic norms and the practice of journalism, particularly television journalism. What is desirable behavior in the classroom is not appropriate for journalists. Further, what may be appropriate in the pages of *The New York Times* may not make any sense in a live television program. And one point made by the authors wouldn't make much sense on television, in a newspaper, or in a classroom.

"Competing Hypotheses"

The authors begin the formal part of their critique with the notion that the networks would be doing everyone a service if they offered "competing hypotheses" for any given electoral outcome. This strikes me as fatuous. What the authors fail to recognize is that an election night broadcast is not a classroom. It is a journalistic operation. And while this journalistic operation goes beyond mere recitation of facts (i.e., votes cast, listing of winners and losers) by offering some sort of explanation for the facts cited, it is not the business of the networks to conduct either a civics lesson or a mini-course in political science.

Ideally, the networks state that some individual won a particular contest and then give a plausible reason for this out-

come with the resources available at that time. Because the authors use the White-Clements contest as an example, I shall do so as well. The authors cite the CBS explanation—the presence of traditional Democrats supporting White—and then turn to the NBC explanation—a coalition of women, blacks, and Hispanics. The authors assert that both networks' explanations were equally plausible, but equally arbitrary.

(CBS News will have to speak for itself, but I don't find the NBC News explanation arbitrary. I still find it convincing. Perhaps we could have done a better job of making the point about women if we had used a "graphic" showing only how men and women voted, but this would have ignored the effect of minorities. Yet it is the case that had women voted like men, Mr. Clements would still be living in the Governor's mansion. We all recognize that in any close contest, the presence of any one group can be used to "explain" the victory. But because we know *a priori* that minorities are highly likely to vote Democratic, and know as well that until 1980, men and women tended to vote similarly, the gender difference in that contest was non-trivial.)

In any event, as part of the "competing hypotheses" theory of appropriate behavior, the authors stress that "any causal argument necessarily implies a (counterfactual) statement of what election outcomes would have occurred in the absence of the identified cause." What the authors fail to understand is that it is the business of journalists to provide the facts as they are known at that time, not counterfactuals. Any complex phenomenon, such as an election, can be analyzed, reanalyzed and reanalyzed again for decades stretching into centuries. That is what political history provides. But it is not what journalism is

meant to do, particularly as the event is unfolding.

The viewer is free to accept or reject on election night any explanation that is offered, and is free to consider new hypotheses presented in the days, weeks, months, and years following the election. To suggest that we should offer no explanation unless we offer several is, in my view, silly.

The authors do make a good point in this section, though; they point out that both CBS and ABC talked extensively about Indiana Republican Representative Hiler's "defeat" due, so they said, to the effects of Reaganomics. But the real problem here was making "predictions" about the outcome based solely on raw vote. I am far less concerned about the lack of competing hypotheses, if you will, than I am about the risks of using raw vote as an indication of anything save the raw vote as it stands at that time. This is something the networks generally do not do, and with good reason.

"The Nature of Television"

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of the article is the authors' fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of television. This observation is endemic to the article, but one example should suffice. To wit: while the authors note that much of election night coverage is "straight-forward," they are disturbed by that fraction they call "analytically impoverished." One of television's virtues—speed—is also one of its limitations. Or, the combination of time constraints and information overload means some things will be emphasized and others ignored. On November 2, 1982, 33 Senate seats were at stake, 36 gubernatorial contests were being held, and elections were being conducted in 433 House districts. The sheer number of contests, coupled with the finite number of minutes in each hour of the broadcast, must mean some things will be stressed and others ignored.

The job of editors is to edit, and the main election night job the networks have taken on for the country is the assembling of a huge amount of information (at enormous cost, by the way)—infor-

mation that is reported very quickly as it flows into our headquarters. Before we left the air on election night in 1982, we had identified the winners in all but three of the 69 senatorial and gubernatorial contests, and had made a good estimate of the probable shift in the partisan division of House seats.

Clearly, one can always do a better job. But believing the networks have time for in-depth analyses of all important contests is, if not lunacy, at least extreme naivete.

"Switchers"

The authors make quite a fuss about how nice it would have been if the networks had used "switchers" as a linchpin in their analyses. But if these authors should know anything at all, they should know the problems of recall information on the vote. I find these academics' belief in the virtue of recall information puzzling, given the rather large corpus of social science literature on the distortions generated by recall questions in general. Indeed, I am persuaded that if the networks had used a great deal of information on switchers, the authors might well have chided them for using data known to be problematic.

Of course, the authors of this article also made some useful suggestions (in addition to having inadvertently drawn attention, as noted above, to the hazards of drawing conclusions from raw vote totals).

Perhaps the most compelling criticism is the authors' distaste for the anecdotal approach. Anecdotes have their place, of course, but they should be used to give color to something, not to explain anything.

Another good criticism they make (but which ought not be limited to television) is the use of crosstabs that are, on their face, ridiculous. (They call this "issues of causal sequence.") They cite the CBS and ABC stories about voters who were concerned about unemployment voting for Democratic candidates. But it is not just ABC, CBS, or, indeed, television which presents this type of story. Newspaper and wire service stories immediate-

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ly following the election were replete with this type of "analysis." It is distressing wherever found.

Thus, while I believe the authors fail to grasp the intrinsic nature of television election night broadcasts, they provide some useful suggestions for our future reporting.

Laurily K. Epstein
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To the Editor:

Although I was very pleased to see the fine piece by Joslyn *et al.* (*PS*, Summer 1984) on a neglected aspect of television's election-night coverage, my own research shows that this coverage is not always as bad as that article portrayed it. Under the guidance of James Eisenstein and Arthur H. Miller, I conducted a study which merged content analysis with panel survey data to assess whether certain political cognitions were affected by the three major networks' 1976 election-night coverage. The results convincingly showed that my sample did learn political information as a result of watching the coverage.

The specific information that people learned from the 1976 election-night coverage illustrates a point that Joslyn *et al.* made—the importance of the much-maligned exit poll. Many of the respondents I studied learned from the coverage what they had not known before: that blacks, Catholics, and labor unions supported the Democratic Party. Each of these groups was tied four or five times on CBS alone to Democrats generally or to Carter specifically, and the main basis of these reports was exit polls.

Although reports based on exit polls did help explain the election to viewers, the educational effect of these reports was stronger for viewers who were already quite interested in or exposed to political news than it was for those who had been less attentive to such news, and even these less politicized viewers were relatively well educated residents of a college town. Therefore, I would be surprised if the average viewer would absorb the more complex televised reports advocated by Joslyn *et al.* Such

reports are better communicated in the print media, which allow people to reread things that are unclear at first. But even if more complex analyses are left off the air, they should still be given to the personnel that are on the air in order to shape more accessible explanations. Election night coverage may be informative already, but it is clear from the analysis by Joslyn *et al.* that it can get better.

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Compared to What?

To the Editor:

Bruce Altshuler's letter about my piece on "The Reformed Nominating System and Its Critics" (Fall 1984) makes a number of good points about the role of the new nominating system in legitimating the winners in the eyes of the losers.

There are, however, several points that I want to clarify. The article was a response to critics of the new system. So it compared features and made judgments about effects. Mr. Altshuler's letter is about the absolute effectiveness of the new system in dealing with the problem of legitimation. His point, that the new system has not always or even usually produced legitimation is well taken. But it should be understood in the context of the ongoing controversy over the new versus the old systems.

My first response is to return to the "compared to what?" question. Both the old and new systems had mechanisms for legitimation. Neither set always worked because the conditions for their fulfillment were not always met. Neither the pre-reform 1968 nor the post-reform 1972 Democratic Conventions were legitimating events. Neither the efforts of party leaders to build unity for Humphrey, nor the effects of primary-generated "momentum" for McGovern, were sufficient to overcome intra-party divisions over the Vietnam War and other things.

The next "compared to what?" question has to do with the changed electoral environment sketched out in the article.

How well would the old system do in the new environment? The evidence cited by Mr. Altshuler supports the view that legitimation is difficult, I agree. The article argues that the task of legitimation has become more difficult due to the participatory quality of the new system and the changed electoral environment. The article goes on to note some features of the new system that may work in favor of party unity. My emphasis was on responding to critics of the new system who have ignored the difficulties of achieving legitimation in the new environment, the inappropriateness of the pre-reform mechanisms in light of those problems, and the existence of legitimating mechanisms in the new system.

With that context in mind, let me turn to the observations in his letter. Mr. Altshuler's criticism is focused on the "momentum" portion of my discussion of new mechanisms. Real momentum, in the sense of increasingly strong showings over time, is actually quite scarce. Most people, however, use a looser definition in which a candidate's increasing delegate strength makes him the ever more likely nominee. I argue that momentum, in either sense, should work best as a legitimating mechanism at the mass level. Using the simple measure of the capacity of the system to make the nominee the most popular candidate with the rank and file by the time of the convention, the new mechanism appears to work at least as well as the older one. Previously obscure candidates—McGov-

ern and Carter—have achieved this status through the extended nomination process as have those who started with more support like Mondale, Ford and Reagan. I am guessing that much of the support that such candidates receive, once they are identified as the likely nominee, comes from rank and file voters most strongly identified with the party and is an expression of their loyalty. Being the most popular candidate with the rank and file and being legitimated are, however, not the same thing. But it helps and is a necessary condition.

Successful legitimation requires that the likely nominee get further help from party elites, especially former opponents. It is in this area, of elite adjustments, that Mr. Altshuler makes his suggestion for a modified legitimation thesis.

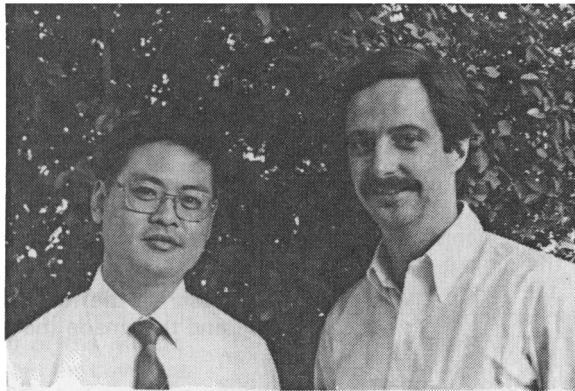
His suggestion is well taken. An assessment of the prospects for legitimation should include the acceptability of a nominee to his defeated opponents. Our work on the 1976 Democrats and Republicans makes precisely this point as well as specifying further conditions for successful legitimation at the elite level such as the eventual nominee's prospects for victory, the issue distance between the candidates, and so on. Because of space limitations, I did not describe the full argument in this article and that made the *PS* piece incomplete.

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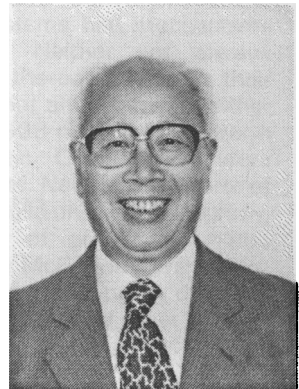
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