

**PERCY H. TANNENBAUM
LESLIE J. KOSTRICH**



**TURNED-ON TV/
TURNED-OFF
VOTERS**

**Policy Options For
Election Projections**

An American Enterprise Institute Book

**TURNED-ON TV/
TURNED-OFF
VOTERS**

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Policy Options For Election Projections

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with assistance from Eric R.A.N. Smith and Michael Berg

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FOREWORD

by Elie Abel

It was 8:15 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, when NBC proclaimed Ronald Reagan the winner on November 4, 1980. At 9:50 p.m. President Carter conceded defeat, again on national television. Citizens were still lining up to vote in parts of Idaho and Oregon, in the whole of California and Washington, in Alaska and Hawaii. What price exit polls and the projections based upon them by the TV networks? Isn't there a better way to order national elections so that citizens of the Western states can feel that their ballots count, too?

Percy Tannenbaum concedes that there are more pressing problems on the national agenda. Yet he abandoned another scholarly project soon after the Reagan victory to identify the issues and search for solutions in a seminar involving his own students at the Graduate School of Public Policy in Berkeley, together with faculty colleagues from Boalt Hall (the Berkeley Law School) and other campus departments. This book is the product of that seminar.

It is admirably brief, lucid, and comprehensive. Tannenbaum offers no cheap, easy solutions. He reminds us that other countries—his native Canada, for example—which spread across several time zones have solved the problem by a statutory prohibition under which local stations cannot broadcast the national election programs until the polls have closed in their respective provinces. Is it altogether outrageous to suggest that we might adopt the Canadian model? Not really. The same U.S. networks that balk at any restrictions of this sort routinely broadcast most of their

prime-time programs west of the Central Time zone on a delayed basis every day of the year. Even the networks' evening news programs are seen on the West Coast with a delay of two to three and a half hours. Putting them on in real time, 3:30 p.m. Pacific Time, would forfeit audience ratings and revenues.

Left to their own devices, the networks are not likely to change their election-night ways. Tannenbaum quotes a network executive to the effect that "if early projections are perceived to be a problem for the voting process . . . the solution should be found in the way the voting process is operated and not by imposing new burdens in journalists who report about it." The message, in short, is don't expect any sacrifice from us. If there is a problem, change the electoral system. One wonders how the media would have treated a comparable show of arrogance from a spokesman for, say, the steel or automobile industry.

Nor is Congress likely to legislate restrictions on election reporting. Regardless of their personal attitudes in the matter, senators and house members cannot be expected to jeopardize their symbiotic relationships with the media by appearing to tamper with First Amendment guarantees. Tannenbaum conceded that radical surgery is not called for. He rules out federal intervention as probably futile. He also suggests that social scientists have possibly exaggerated the extent to which network projections — and, for that matter, the early Carter concession — may have cut into voter turnout in the western states. The data are slippery enough to enjoin caution.

Tannenbaum's preference for modest solutions to public policy problems leads him to advocate small, measured steps toward reform. A sufficiently determined body of citizens, for example, could effectively sabotage the network exit polls by refusing to say how they voted. Alternatively, the networks might be persuaded to abandon exit polling if a group of esteemed civic leaders, reinforced by major advertisers, were to launch a patriotic appeal.

The most intriguing, and pain-free, of Tannenbaum's modest proposals is that California (and other western states whose citizens felt disenfranchised the last time around) shrink the problem down to size by action at the state level in two relatively simple steps: First, postpone the annual reversion from Daylight to Standard Time from the last Sunday in October to the first Sunday after the November

election, a matter of no more than two weeks in the worst possible case. That would shave the three-hour time difference between New York and Los Angeles to two hours. Then, by closing state polls an hour early — at 7 p.m. instead of 8 p.m. — California could further reduce the real-time gap to a single hour. True, the Uniform Time Act of 1966 would need to be amended, not an impossible task if the California legislature and congressional delegation were of one mind. But it is at least conceivable that the networks would lobby to block even this modest change on the ground that their broadcast schedules would be disarranged, however briefly.

It is clear that reasonable remedies can be devised and that Tannenbaum has reviewed most of the options. It is less clear that the problem of exit polls and network projections troubles enough Americans to mobilize a successful reform campaign.

PREFACE

In the weeks following the 1980 presidential elections, I was contacted by a number of colleagues and more than one foundation about the possibility of conducting some study on the effect of early projection of the winner of the presidential contest. The issue had received some attention in the immediate aftermath of the election and it seemed I was particularly well-located—in terms of both scholarly interest and geography—to undertake such a study. Communication policy was supposed to be one of my areas of expertise and this problem clearly belonged under that rubric. Further, it involved the use of survey techniques and wasn't I the director of a university-based survey research operation? I was also located in California, where the problem seemed most acute and where its notoriety was most pronounced. Not least, I was on a campus where a number of well-known and respected scholars of the American political process could be called upon if necessary to help out on such a project.

While the issue did fit my varied interests rather well, it didn't quite fit my personal research agenda at the time. I was at the tail end of one major project, with a book-length report already overdue; I had committed myself to about a dozen other assignments (the usual academic array of articles, chapters, symposium papers, and lectures) that were due in the next few months; I was embarking on some new methodological research that had grabbed my interest at the moment. While of some concern on the surface, the early projection issue just did not appear to be important enough at first glance to tackle at the time. My initial reaction was rather along the lines of Nobel Prize-winning author Saul Bellow, who saw a certain similarity

between election forecasting and how he feels about critiques of his work:

I've read few of the critical works. I don't pay too much attention to them. I always think, the end is not yet, and when I see these things I think: "Don't announce the results of the election or the people on the (West) Coast will walk away from the polls" (quoted in Kennedy, 1982).

But the issue wouldn't quite go away. I discussed it with a number of colleagues and found some expressions of interest. In fact, one of them, Raymond Wolfinger, quickly seized the initiative and, with the help of a student, conducted an analysis of earlier data and prepared a paper for publication (and in the process used a most appropriate, catchy title that could have applied to this book). We discussed the possibilities of some original research (a postelection survey in California, for example) but that type of study seemed too big to take on within the apparent time frame; by the time one prepares a full proposal for such a study solicits and receives financial support (an uncertain proposition in the first place), it would probably be too late to do such a study. But I did hear of the possibility of a follow-up study by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies, and that seemed a natural tie-in. Moreover, if it was not feasible for us to mount a California study of our own, we could possibly negotiate with Mervyn Field's California Poll to add some items to one of their regular statewide canvasses. As it happened, our Michigan colleagues decided to use another survey organization (a commercial one) to conduct their follow-up study but we did get to tie into the California Poll conducted in January 1981.

At that time too I was planning to teach a seminar on communication policy during the winter quarter of 1981. I usually take a particular problem area as the focus for such a seminar, and I was in the process of making the necessary arrangements for that year's seminar when the projection problem loomed on the scene. It seemed more appropriate than the problem I was considering, and I rapidly switched topics. Announcements of the new focus were sent out for circulation among students in my own academic base at Berkeley,

the Graduate School of Public Policy, and in a number of allied campus units (the Law School, Political Science, Sociology, and Psychology departments, etc.).

I was also aware that the American Enterprise Institute, through my friend and colleague of long standing, Austin Ranney, was involved in a series of studies of the election and that this issue could fit into that scheme. After an initial contact I proposed, and he agreed to, a policy analysis of the election projection problem; it would be a relatively short-term modest effort, as befits the issue. I proposed to use the one-term seminar as the main venue for the analysis, and we would prepare a report afterwards. At the time, neither of us had any idea of the scope of such a report but the possibility of a book was mentioned. In addition, through the good offices of Warren Breed, the Pericles Foundation of Walnut Creek, California provided a modest grant to assist with some of the seminar expenses. Most importantly, I had the excellent facilities of the Berkeley Survey Research Center, as well as an excellent group of colleagues, to call upon.

The seminar turned out to be one of those fortuitous teaching-learning situations that arise all too infrequently but are so dear and precious when they do occur. My solicitation managed to attract a small but admirably able and balanced group of graduate students from various campus units. About half the students had been trained in the techniques and approaches of policy analysis; some had excellent legal training at Boalt Hall (the Law School at Berkeley); another was finishing his degree in political science, specializing in political behavior and data analysis; another was specializing in political psychology, and one had taken an undergraduate course with me and was eager to pursue his studies in communication policy further. The seminar provided an excellent forum for each of us to vent his ideas on the issue, to define its main characteristics, and to engage in the type of critical exchange that I find so essential to formulating a problem and developing an appropriate plan of attack.

We rapidly settled on a number of key subissues and avenues of approach, and developed an appropriate division of labor among the seminar members that turned out to be most fortuitous in representing the main facets of the problem. By this time I had also had the good fortune to engage Leslie Kostrich, a former student

at the Graduate School of Public Policy, who was between jobs (actually, between trips abroad, as it turned out) and interested enough to become involved as the central coordinator of the project.

It didn't take long for word to get around about our project, and others interested in the problem got in touch with us. In particular, the Los Angeles County Registrar's Office needed some assistance analyzing their study of nonvoters, and this opened up other possibilities for our seminar group. We also dealt with a representative of the California Secretary of State's office, the national League of Women Voters, and the various congressional committees investigating the various bills proposed in Congress.

The result is the team effort represented by this volume. The use of the "we" pronoun is deliberate. While it is often employed in the singular editorial sense, in that only my personal views are being expressed, most if not all of the ideas in here were discussed openly with most if not all of the seminar participants, either during the seminar or afterward when the book was being prepared. The students gave valuable criticism to any suggestions I had to offer (I used the seminar setting as a means of thinking out loud on occasion) and I make liberal use of the content from several of their term papers in the following text.

As is usually the case with such joint efforts, the division of labor and participation was not exactly equal. In the interest of equity, I find it necessary to acknowledge the different contributions by some hierarchical representation—hence the rather awkward title page.

I was the principal investigator and, in effect, the main if not the sole author. I culled all that my associates and seminar students had prepared but in the end the words and positions represented are mine alone. I doubt any of my associates on this project would agree with the bulk of it. It is, accordingly, I and I alone that bear the sole responsibility for any errors of omission or commission contained herein.

The contribution of Leslie Kostrich has to be singled out for special mention. Leslie was my right-hand person in this project—an astute observer, willing and able to penetrate to the essentials of a problem, ferreting out the facts and laying out the problem, and, perhaps most importantly, getting it down on paper in clear, concise prose. We operate differently but our styles tended to complement one another.

She was a wonderful associate and her performance and sensitivity gave me renewed pride and pleasure in the training we provide in our Public Policy program at Berkeley. She prepared drafts of most of the chapters and fully deserves a coauthor status.

Eric Smith (now of the Department of Political Science at Columbia University) provided a more limited but highly significant contribution to this volume. He served as a Research Assistant on the project for part of its duration and took the main responsibility for the various secondary data analyses and evaluations of the evidence from other studies. His contribution is mainly apparent in chapter 2, for which he is the rightful coauthor. But he was an invaluable member of the research team, providing feedback and guidance in other aspects of the problem, as well. He accordingly merits special billing.

Michael Berg deserves to be ranked at the same level. He took on the exit poll issue (chapter 5) as his particular focus, and completed his so-called Advanced Policy Analysis (the equivalent of a Master's thesis) on this topic as part of his requirements for his degree in Public Policy (Berg, 1981). In addition, his willingness to help analyze a variety of other legal considerations (he was a joint student in Public Policy and the Law School at the time) greatly facilitated my own thinking and writing. His contributions are apparent at several points in the volume. His soft-spoken and low-key approach provides proper cover for a disciplined and persistent analytical mind.

Richard Cooper and Jon Elliott also contributed significantly to the legal parts of the analysis. We borrowed heavily and rewrote substantially large chunks of Cooper's seminar paper in preparing the legal background to the discussion of early returns (chapter 6) and to other parts of the volume. Elliott's paper concentrated on current legislation before Congress, resolutions, and the anticipated action of state officials in terms of both legality and political feasibility. His contributions are particularly reflected in the section on state action (chapter 7) and in discussing the likely position of county election officials in various parts of the volume.

Southey Swede's direct contribution was mostly in terms of the preelection polls in the 1980 election and somewhat to the discussion of the development of the history of projections by the broad-

cast networks. While working with me on a separate project, he provided useful feedback on a number of issues that arose during this particular study.

Peter Hammersley's paper provided some of the background material for the chapter on media interventions (chapter 6). While he was forced to work at somewhat of a handicap because of the considerable physical distance between him and his primary sources, he did get an appreciation for the position of the television industry and the central networks.

I am more than pleased to acknowledge the active help of each of these student associates, along with a number of colleagues who gave of their wise counsel on the few occasions they were called upon. As always, Aaron Wildavsky had the proper insights about the underlying intellectual and political issues and Ray Wolfinger provided several leads to useful answers. I am also grateful to Jim Wiley for serving as a sounding board on some methodological problems and in helping relieve me of some of the administrative duties at the Survey Research Center, an organized research unit on the Berkeley campus whose resources contributed significantly to the study.

I also express my appreciation for the support of the John and Mary Markle Foundation over the past five years. That grant was directed at another problem area—the design of information systems for the elderly—but on two occasions the Markle officials were most understanding in allowing me to delay completion of a book manuscript on that project while I pursued matters of more pressing immediacy, including the preparation of the present volume.

The book itself took longer to write than I had anticipated, even with the help I had from my associates. This is partially a matter of my personal style but also because I was aware that Austin Ranney would be reading it as soon as I was finished with my end. I regard him as a most knowledgeable and critical colleague, in the best sense of the term, but a formidable one nevertheless.

Lani Kask has become expert at using the UNIX text processing system on this manuscript, and she provided much useful editorial help in the manuscript's preparation. I am also most grateful to my wife, Brocha, for her stoic forbearance with an often cranky, preoccupied mate and her willingness to sacrifice some personal