Better Campaign Reporting: A View From the Major Leagues

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As someone who has reported on this Association for two decades, who has profited from what I have learned from you, I am deeply honored to deliver this lecture, following such major figures who have connected political science to the real world as Lee Hamilton, Donna Shalala, Pat Moynihan, and, of course, Dick Cheney. Big time.

The title of my talk, though certainly influenced by the unguarded honesty of George W. Bush almost a year ago, really is meant to reflect nearly 40 years of campaign reporting for the *Baltimore Sun* and *The New York Times*. In good years and bad, they play in the majors.

At this convention a year ago, an address on better campaign reporting probably would not have required a microphone, for we could have sat around a table, a small table. After all, it was the revealed truth of your discipline that Al Gore was going to win the election, based on the economy plus an assortment of other numbers, from President Clinton's poll ratings to the mean temperature at the Iowa caucuses. Campaigns either did not matter at all, or else proceeded with equal skill or clumsiness in both parties. Under that regime, reporting on campaigns did not matter either—except perhaps to imbue the eventual, if foreordained, winner with an abiding dislike of reporters.

Now, I am sure that some poor graduate students are spending this holiday weekend tinkering with those formulas, refining them so that they will show that Bush won. Let me suggest that they figure out a way to measue the partisanship of Supreme Court justices. I won't go so far as to suggest that political scientists discard their computers and, with them, the vain hope that they will be recognized as the equivalent in precision of physicists or mathematicians. I won't suggest it, but I'm tempted.

For the time being, though, let us assume that campaigns matter, and that reporting on them may matter. I don't mean that good campaign reporting will guarantee that the best candidates, from your perspective or mine, will be elected. I can't recall how many times I was berated in the 1980s for not exposing Ronald Reagan's talent at imagining history. In fact, we exposed it, but the American people did not care. Better campaign reporting cannot promise dramatic results. But if we do it better and the voters ignore us, then it's on them, not us, when they wake up surprised that President Bush is so conservative.

Now, I am not going to argue for the good old days, when all political reporting was better than it is today. In most ways, it is better today.

But to understand how we got here, it's essential to recognize the impact of a single book, Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960*. With rare ac cess and with singular insight, Teddy described strategy sessions, explained why candidates said what they did, how Kennedy prepared for the first debate, and how Nixon did not.

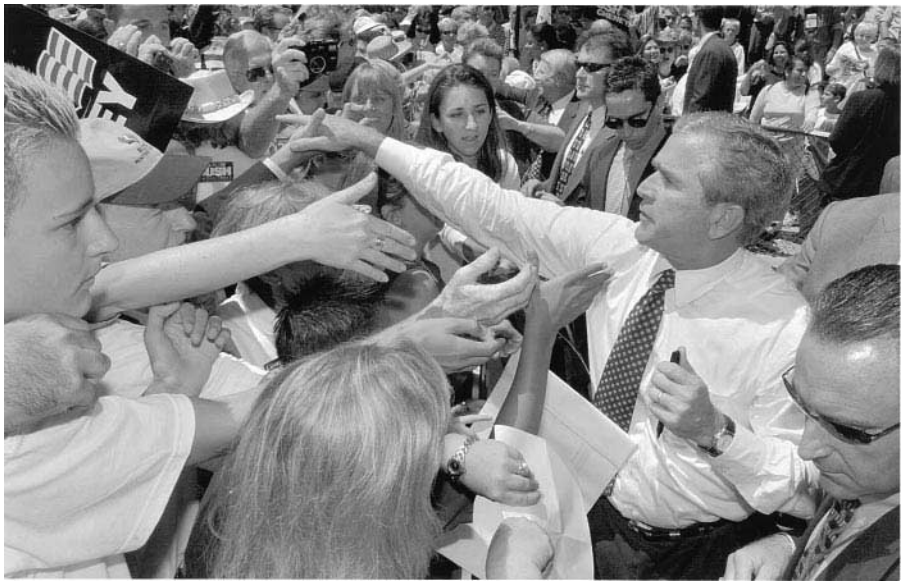
Reporters read that book, and concluded that they could probe deeper than they had before. They started going beneath the surface of speeches and reporting internal arguments about strategy. While they may not have had the access Teddy White had, they had this advantage: campaign workers read White's book, too, and decided that they could look smart by helping reporters get the inside story of how they reached the inspired decision that helped their man win, or how their bright ideas had been overlooked. This started happening even before the rise of the consultant class, which sometimes helps its clients win, but almost always comes up with the catchy soundbite quote for itself.

There is no question that this digging, and those leaks, have improved political reporting. There are obvious instances, like explaining why Ronald Reagan chose to begin his post-convention campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a symbol of racism and the Ku Klux Klan—or what Al Gore's managers meant to convey about his personaliy by the "earth tones" of his suits. Ad there are subtler advantages. I think of a story my colleague Rick Berke wrote about the way Bush and Gore ran their campaigns and handled their staffs. You may remember: Gore designed his own campaign logo and Bush didn't know what a logo was. That



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George W. Bush on the 2000 campaign trail. AP photo.

story gave us an insight into Bush's future style in office, and what Gore's might have been. Another example of the kind of story that this post-Teddy White reporting enables, even demands, is the sort of review of the importance of recent political developments exemplified last year by Dan Balz in the *Washington Post*. His regular pieces were titled "The Story So Far."

To come back to Teddy White, he loved politics and enjoyed politicians, whom he called in an author's note, "men whom I have found over the long years the pleasantest, shrewdest and generally the most honorable of companions." Teddy was a friendly skeptic.

But some of today's reporters have taken his skepticism a few steps too far, into cynicism, thinking candidates never mean what they say and so the strategy and tactics are always the story, rather than the speech and its argument and whether it makes any sense.

For myself, I think what candidates say falls into three categories, along with a fourth, which is what they do not say.

Let us get that silent category out of the way first. Candidates often do not say things they believe because they foresee political harm if they do. They count on their followers to know what they think and to vote accordingly, but they want to avoid stirring up the people who disagree. That worked for Bush when he did not talk about abortion. It failed for Gore in the fall when he did not talk about the environment or gun control. He lost West Virginia anyway. Indeed, Gore avoided so many subjects, including the booming economy much of the time, that it was not clear what he was for, and that is always dangerous.

But as to what they do say, the first category comprises candidates saying what they believe, as long as they think it will help them politically. This does not exclude stretching the truth, as they say.

Bush on tax cuts. Gore on global warming. To fall into this honesty category, a candidate's speech need not be based on a thorough understanding of all elements of a problem or how the candidate's solution would work. That's always nice, but what matters is belief. Think of the Trinity—or of antiballistic missiles.

In a second category, candidates say what their handlers tell them to say—without believing it or disbelieving it. Remember when Bush said, "We will require all power plants to meet clean air standards in order to reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon dioxide"? That was September 29, 2000. In March 2001, after someone explained how reducing carbon dioxide emissions would be very costly, he understood the situation and broke his promise, a promise doubtless made because someone on his staff thought he was losing suburban women by sounding too much like a polluter.

These two areas comprise almost all campaign speech.

To be sure, there is a third category: when candidates simply lie about their beliefs because they think it will help them politically. The best example of that from 2000 is John McCain defending the Confederate flag in South Carolina as a reflection of "heritage."

Now, reporters don't use the word "lie" in their copy, but I can use it tonight because McCain later admitted he said it only for political gain and really thought the flag represented slavery.

A lot of reporters, unfortunately, assume this last category to be the biggest one, or at least they write their stories that way. These are the stories that put motive and tactics up front, beginning with phrases like "Seeking to burnish his conservative credentials," or "In another bid for the crucial soccer mom vote."

Those motivations, if the reporter really knows what they are, certainly belong in the story, but in the third or fourth paragraph, after some sense of what the candidate is saying. Then come back to the substance and explain it thoroughly.

One important campaign story, pointed out to me by Steve Hess of the Brookings Institution, illustrates the issues of cynicism and thoroughness—and the trivial nature of most political coverage on television, too. On May 23, 2000, candidate Bush proposed deep, perhaps unilateral reductions in the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, and renewed his enthusiasm for antiballistic missiles, regardless of the 1972 ABM treaty. He said a missile-defense system should protect the United States, its European allies, and Israel. In what seemed like an effort to show that his ideas were not half-baked, he assembled Republican veterans of the Cold War, like Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and Colin Powell, to stand behind him.

The major newspapers and the Associated Press covered the story as important news, providing as much detail as Bush offered, along with Democratic reaction, and occasionally outside experts to evaluate his ideas. Most pointed out that on the same day, Pentagon brass were telling Congress that they opposed further reductions in nuclear weapons. The question of Bush's inexperience, and the backdrop of foreign policy veterans was rarely ignored, but nowhere emphasized.

You can't say that for television. This was a day that fully justifies how little attention I give television in this talk. On ABC, Peter Jennings emphasized the familiar Republican veterans standing behind Bush. Jennings's second point was that "Mr. Bush has been criticized for lacking international experience." Only then did he get to what Bush said, reporting "He said if he is elected president, he will reduce the number of nuclear weapons to what he called today, 'the lowest possible number consistent with national security.' " Then he noted that the joint chiefs disliked further cuts. He never mentioned the ABM issue.

Over at NBC, Tom Brokaw's cursory,

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76-word report mentioned missile defense, but not the Joint Chiefs. At least he did not use any of his 76 words on Bush's supposed ignorance and inexperience.

CBS gave the longest coverage, for two minutes, but both Dan Rather's lead-in and Phil Jones's report started with motive and tactics, not substance. Rather said, "Bush is now trying to define himself and punch up his credentials." Jones began, "It was the perfect campaign photo-op today. There was the would-be president with his would-be secretary of state, Colin Powell, and others to lend young Bush credibility as he called for significant reductions in nuclear weapons." The Jones piece got better. It included two Bush soundbites, of 31 and 28 words each, and cited Pentagon opposition and the missile defense issue, along with a criticism from Gore.

Even the sainted PBS *NewsHour* did not offer an analysis of Bush's weapons cut proposal, though it did offer a 56-word soundbite.

Covering these stories in a way that makes sense of campaign proposals is one of the two most important things we do, along with measuring and explaining a candidate's record. Combined, they give voters a chance to know what to expect if the candidate is elected. Americans traditionally doubt that candidates keep campaign promises. But consider Bush's first eight months, and there is a serious commitment to tax cuts, school testing, faith-based initiatives, missile defense, drilling in the Arctic, and partial privatization of Social Security. Bush repeatedly articulated every one of those ideas during the campaign, and reporters should have thoroughly explained them.

Why don't we explain these proposals better than we do, for we often don't do as well as we did that day in May? The glib answer is that we are wasting our energies probing the candidates' sex lives or spending our time overinterpreting tracking polls of little real significance. We may make those mistakes, more about them later, but that's not why we often fail to explain a major policy proposal.

We often fail because it's hard. For a reporter traveling with a candidate, with no research material to fall back on, and 45 minutes to write before the bus leaves, it's nearly impossible to do a thorough job on a complicated subject. For major newspapers, though, that's not an excuse, because there is someone back in Washington who has more time and more resources, either for a separate analysis, or to fold into the report from Saginaw or Harrisburg.



Al Gore works the rope line during 2000 presidential campaign. AP photo.

Another reason we fall short is that the conventions of our line of work seem to dictate giving a politician the opportunity not just to lay out his plan but also to get the benefit of the doubt over how it will work. Of course, we include a criticism of a Gore plan by a Bush aide, and vice versa. But frequently the desire to let the candidate have his say about his idea does not leave room for any independent judgment from nonpartisan experts on health care, or disarmament, or acid rain. Covering almost any dispute, and a presidential election is as big a dispute as we get, reporters want their stories to seem fair to people on both sides of an argument.

So we do not write stories that begin: "Governor George W. Bush today proposed a $1.6 trillion tax cut that will destroy the budget surplus unless prosperity continues at current record levels for the next 10 years."

My columnist colleague Paul Krugman can write that, but we don't do that in the news columns. I think we should get closer to that edge, though not in the main news story, but in an analytical sidebar. When we have reporters who know the economy or the health care system better than the candidates do, we should push them to write analytical pieces that rely on their expertise, and not just to round up the usual professors for opposing quotations.

There is one final reason why the press leaves it largely to the competing candidates to say that a proposal will or won't work. We have learned how to report that a candidate lied (though we still don't like the verb) about his war record or voting record. But that's in the past. What Aristotle called future fact is much less, well, factual. Will scrapping the ABM Treaty and developing antiballistic missiles make us more secure, as Bush believes? Or will that policy threaten an established and stable world order, as the Russians argue? Partisans say it is obvious; most reporters know the extent of our ignorance.

There is no area of campaign coverage where issues are more central than in the reporting of debates, the events that often define the closing weeks of the campaign. We are sometimes blamed for how the public interprets debates, but in fact there is no kind of campaign coverage where balance is more obvious than the news stories about debates. Here is a typical lead paragraph, from the *Chicago Tribune* of October 4, 2000:

"Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush used the first debate of the fall presidential campaign to try to seize the lead in a neck-and-neck race, with the Democrat promising 'a prosperity that endures and enriches' and the Republican asserting he wanted to 'empower Americans to make decisions for themselves.' "

Nor was that tone reserved for the lead paragraphs. When one candidate later got a paragraph to himself, the next went to his opponent. You could find that same basic approach in any serious newspaper.

Now, there is nothing wrong with that in a story that is being written in a terrible hurry, and one whose main function is to convey what was said.

But there is hardly an important newspaper that did not accompany its news

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story with an analytical piece—and here many writers shirked their responsibility in their analyses. I don't mean the responsibility to declare a winner, but a responsibility to analyze what the candidates said and how credible they were.

The *Boston Globe* analysis said, "The public saw two men whose eyes, gestures, and manner suggested that they were ready, willing and maybe even able to take command, not only in the pastoral duties of the presidency but also in the persuasive, evangelical role."

The New York Times said, "Both the Republican and the Democrat had some reason for satisfaction."

The *Washington Post* said, "Both candidates cleared the bar of minimum requirements in their performances tonight. Neither fulfilled the negative stereotypes about himself, and both took advantage of the ample opportunities to put forward the best case for their policies."

Ron Brownstein of the *Los Angeles Times* did the best job, writing in his fourth paragraph: "Gore appeared more confident and steady. . . . Bush stumbled a bit on some questions—surprisingly seeming unsteady when presenting his critique of the administration's military policy, but overall the Texan is likely to benefit from remaining cool in the face of Gore's unrelenting critiques."

But post-debate analysis could have been blunter. It could have said that Bush seemed lost, and Gore sounded rude.

It could have pointed out that when discussing Serbia, Bush sounded as if he didn't know much about the Russian role, which Bush himself brought up. It could have noted that when asked how he had shown he could handle an unexpected crisis, a question Gore had answered directly, Bush seemed distracted, talking about how he had gone to Del Rio, Texas, when there was a flood to put his arms around "a man and his family and cry with them." It could have said that the long-armed Bush inaccurately described how his tax cut proposal would affect the rich and the poor. Next, it would have pointed out that Gore seemed downright rude, interrupting Bush, rolling his eyes at some of the things Bush said, and sighing loudly.

Perhaps campaigns are no fun to cover any more because today's reporters have the technological tools to work all the time, transcribing speeches and news conferences or searching the Internet by wireless from a bus. And they don't go out and drink much any more, at least not if the health-club is still open.

Except for bringing up Gore's manners, even the analyses on succeeding days did not fill most of the gaps well. These follow-up pieces, egged on by the shocked, shocked response of the Bush team, repeated a year-long theme that Gore's verbal imprecision and exaggeration indicated some fundamental personal weakness. That story line had been thoroughly discredited in April by Robert Parry in the *Washington Monthly* but campaign reporters would not let go of it. This time the example seized on by the Bush campaign and taken seriously by reporters was Gore's misstatement that he had accompanied Jamie Lee Witt, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to Texas when floods and fires broke out. It was, in fact, the deputy director he accompanied.

There is something even worse about the immediate post-debate analysis than what it ignored. It concentrated on political tactics, on whether Bush or Gore had achieved the political goals he needed, but not on what they said or whether they leveled with the voting public.

The frequnt use of the word "performance" was a tipoff that reporters seemed to think they were judging diving or figure skating, or reviewing a play. The theater-reviewing virus has spread widely since first appearing in 1988. Baby boomer reporters of that year expected to be entertained by covering a presidential campaign, and they found Michael Dukakis and the elder Bush dull, as they and their successors have found every candidate since, except Ross Perot and John McCain. Last year it seemed worse than in the past, because reporters seemed to like the approachable Bush better than the standoffish Gore. That's human enough, but we're supposed to overcome it.

Perhaps reporters are not having fun because they think candidates are dishonest and plastic. Perhaps campaigns are no fun to cover any more because today's reporters have the technological tools to work all the time, transcribing speeches and news conferences or searching the Internet by wireless from a bus. And they don't go out and drink much any more, at least not if the health club is still open. I didn't find George McGovern or Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan "fun" to cover, but I was intrigued by the campaigns they were part of and I enjoyed the camaraderie of the traveling press corps. It was a job. I got paid for it. I didn't think it should be the equivalent of a good new Broadway play.

One essential part of campaign reporting that is done far better than it used to be is the review of candidates' records. We look at the record much more thoroughly than we used to. Almost every education writer in the country trooped down to Texas to see how Bush's claims on school progress measured up. Jack Farrell of the *Boston Globe* examined the Texas record on the death penalty and won the Raymond Clapper Award for his efforts. I spent a couple of weeks looking at health care in Texas, which may be why Bush made me, if not a household word, then a barnyard word. Compare these stories to the rather slim, almost casual examination of Jimmy Carter's record as governor in 1976, or the puffy appraisal of Dukakis's tenure in 1988, and you see that sometimes we improve.

The huge biographical pieces are more debatable. In 10 or 12 installments of two or three pages each, these pieces tell us every toy the candidate got each Christmas, and whether there was a sled named Rosebud. They often run on too long, and inherently depend too heavily on family and friends as sources, especially for the early years. But they sometimes offer important insights, like Melinda Henneberger's report in *The Times* that Gore's upbringing in a relative's hotel was hardly luxurious but a way for his family to save money. If the stories seem endless, well, editors should have cut them.

We run these pieces earlier and earlier. It used to be common to run them, one per candidate, maybe 3,000 words tops, in the week between Christmas and New Year's on the lofty theory that readers were getting ready to pay attention to the presidential race. Except in Iowa, that was a bum theory, but there

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was usually no other news competing for space. As campaigns get longer, and until last year they only got longer by starting earlier, not by ending later, those pieces have crept into the fall, or even the previous summer. The *Washington Post* started its Bush biography on July 23, 1999, more than 15 months before Election Day. As we push these pieces back earlier and earlier, we tend to compete with each other more than we serve the reader, and we're left with the dilemma of how to say it all again, in a different voice, in the fall of election year itself when people really are paying some attention.

These pieces sometimes provoke the standard politician's complaint that the press probes too deeply into the personal lives of candidates. It is true that we probe more, and write more, than we used to. I remember seeing Russell Long drunk in the Senate chamber in 1963, hustled out by two colleagues before he collapsed, and being told by my elders that we didn't write about such things. We should have, and today we would. In campaigns we now try to learn how healthy the candidates are, and from Paul Tsongas to Dick Cheney, many of them don't like it.

It should come as no surprise that the press spent thousands of dollars and months of work in 2000, trying to see if George Bush had used illegal drugs, a subject on which he had been notably evasive while admitting he used to drink too much. That effort was proper and responsible for at least two reasons. One is that as governor, Bush had taken a very tough line on drug offenses. If he had committed the same crimes himself and escaped punishment, perhaps because he was a rich, well-connected white man, that would have been an important story.

The effort was also notable because no one wrote about suspicions or unconfirmed reports, or even ran one of those press pieces you see from time to time—the one that says it is news that nine major news outfits have 14 reporters trying to see if Bush used drugs, thereby publishing rumors under the guise of reporting that journalists are checking them out. Nobody found credible evidence, so nobody wrote about it.

But they also didn't write much about Bush's drinking. Because he was evasive about drug use, the press tried to pounce. Because he admitted he used to drink too much, the press forgot about it. People who drink a lot and drive as much as Texans do often get caught driving drunk, and I'm not aware of any serious press effort to see whether Bush was one of them. Sure, the story of one arrest in Maine broke shortly before Election Day, but by energetic leaking, not energetic reporting.

Does this stuff matter? Hardly anyone questions that a candidate's arrest record is news, although the *Portland Press-Herald* knew of Bush's arrest last summer and did not print it.

But what about something legal that many Americans heartily disapprove of? If a candidate paid for an abortion, or had one herself, is that news we should dig out? Getting drunk? Getting drunk often? What about a string of adulterous affairs, or just one? Padding an expense account? Cheating in college? In high school?

Most of the questions about what to print are hard questions without obvious answers. My inclination in most things, though, is to publish rather than to suppress.

After the press stopped ignoring all of this stuff, there had to be a standard. For a while it was a standard that said, "Well, if it affects how he does his job, like Russell Long drunk while voting, then we should run it." Later it was expanded to "Well, if it shows hypocrisy, like Gary Hart using his family as a campaign backdrop and then sailing off on the *Monkey Business*, then it's news, but if other candidates play around but leave their family off the campaign trail, they get a pass." And then there was the rationale that if somebody else has used it (even an Australian tabloid will do), then it's a factor in the campaign and we have to make sure our readers understand the facts.

Most of the questions about what to print are hard questions without obvious answers. My inclination in most things, though, is to publish rather than to suppress. For while I have argued that it is our job to explain issues we think should matter to voters—like Bush's record on health in Texas—it is definitely not our role as reporters to decide what should NOT matter to voters. I would vote for a candidate who had an abortion; someone who thinks abortion is murder might not. It's not my business to say, "Your prejudice is unworthy, and I will prevent you from exercising it by keeping you ignorant." Leave the judgment about worthy and unworthy prejudices to the columnists and editorial writers.

Another thing we do better these days is report on public opinion, on what Americans think matters in a campaign and how the candidates come across. As a matter of full disclosure, I should note that I am a recovering pollster myself, and 11 years after I stopped running polling at *The Times*, I still occasionally lapse by suggesting a question or even writing a poll story.

Newspapers and television networks conduct some of the best polls in the country. Thus our readers and watchers know what their fellow citizens think, and they also know what the candidates' handlers know. Polls provide a check on some far-fetched claims the campaigners make about public opinion, and are valuable not just in the first article about a poll, but as an element in later stories about revisions in Medicare or political appeals to Catholics.

Poll stories during a campaign do not have to be about who is winning, though it's just plain silly to argue that the "horse race" is not a matter of some importance. If it were not, then political scientists would never ask me who I think is going to win.

Consider two stories by Rick Berke and Janet Elder in *The Times*. On July 25, 2000, just before the Republican convention, they wrote, "For all the focus on how the candidates are dashing toward the center politically and in some cases sounding alike, more than 7 out of 10 Americans said there were genuine differences between them. More than half the public thinks those contrasts are more about issues than about personal qualities." The horse-race numbers came in the sixth paragraph. By October 2, just before the first debate, they reported that the public thought both Bush and Gore were strong leaders with the potential to be effective as president, but considered Gore better prepared for the White House and for dealing with world leaders and Congress. The horse race was in the ninth paragraph. At the end of June, the *Washington Post* did a poll story that illuminated the education issue—where Bush had made significant inroads—in greater depth than anyone else had approached.

But in the fall, every *Washington Post* story on its polls led with the horse race, even when it showed no serious change, and other papers did much the same with their polls. *The Times*'s policy of keeping the numbers out of the very top

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of a story might be harder to defend if a poll showed a sudden sharp change in the standings. Such swings are rare, especially in an era when there is a new, serious poll coming out every two or three days. That kind of change just did not happen in last year's campaign.

There is no question that news organizations with big investments in polls overplay them. Compare them to other kinds of news. Things staying the same never used to be big news. But these days, a story saying "Dogs bite men, our poll shows," could lead a lot of newspapers.

These criticisms apply even to the use of the serious, 1,000 to 1,200 sample, three- or four-day polls that involve a serious regime of callbacks.

That takes too long for cable television or *USA Today*, though, so now we have a daily story about a nightly tracking poll, reporting tiny blips as if they were tectonic shifts. Have they managed to repeal sampling error?

I have talked about reporting this evening, and obviously editors bear a responsibility for political stories, too. But there is one area where editors have the entire responsibility, and I bring that up because we rarely hear complaints about stories that are not on the front page (except from reporters who think their work belongs there). Editors, not reporters, decide what goes on page one. So perhaps more of your complaints, and political scientists run a close second to campaign press secretaries in finding fault, should be less about reporters than about editors. Editors who would never dream of ignoring a science editor's view of whether Pluto is a planet think nothing of being know-it-alls when it comes to elections, even if they have never really covered one. After all, they vote, don't they?

Let us take an example: the RATS story, about the subliminal letters in a Bush ad. Personally, I think it belonged in the paper but not on page one, where it ran in a box, below the fold, and was the only political story on the page. In fact, it was not our front-page play but the incessantly repetitive coverage of the story by cable television that kept it alive. And surely no one expects *The Times* to bury a story because cable television can't be trusted to deal with it intelligently.

Finally, I don't want to close without discussing a topic that in most years would be routine, the Wednesday morning story saying who won. There has been no end of examinations of how and why television got it wrong.

The explanation of how dozens of papers, including *The New York Times,* got it wrong is pretty simple—newspaper editors watched television. In our case they also believed that since Gore was ready to concede, he must have known something special. However, all Gore knew was what was on the tube.

Still, what else could the papers do? No newspaper has a staff big enough to really know what's going on all over the country, or is ready to invest the millions it would take to become a part of the Voter News Service.

Well, the answer is that newspapers could have paid attention to the Associated Press, to whom they already pay millions in membership fees. AP is a partner in the Voter News Service and has access to its projections and vote count. AP also conducts its own vote count. And it depends on its state bureau chiefs, often nudged by Washington, to call elections.

Last November, AP's Washington Bureau Chief, Sandy Johnson, its Florida bureau chief, Kevin Walsh, and Will Lester, a polling writer who had worked in Florida and lived in Broward County, never felt comfortable calling Florida for Bush. They held back even when the networks called it, and when major newspapers like ours and Reuters, their only wire service competitor, decided the networks could not be wrong.

The last network call was at 2:20 A.M., and AP kept staring at its numbers, as members all over the country phoned to ask why it had not called the race. At 3:11 A.M. the news service sent out an advisory, telling its members:

"The lead in Florida for George W. Bush has dwindled to about 6,000 in the vote count. A small percentage of the vote has yet to be reported in several counties, including two predominantly Democratic counties."

"AP believes the uncounted votes in Broward and Palm Beach counties could allow a change of the lead in the Florida vote. We are watching the resolution of the actual vote count to assure if there is a change in the Florida results, which could yet have an impact on the outcome of the presidential election."

That was the smartest campaign coverage of the night.

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