

Obviously, campaigns matter

Just call it the election that won't go away. Pick up the papers last Wednesday morning, and 154 days late, the headlines blare: Bush prevails in Florida vote.

A recount of more than 64,000 contested "undervote" ballots, conducted by a national accounting firm for a consortium of newspapers, showed that George W. Bush would have beaten Al Gore if the courts had permitted all the disputed ballots to be counted by the lenient standards Gore was seeking.

Count hanging chads, swinging chads, dimples, pinpricks on ballots where no presidential choice was officially tallied, and Bush gets to stay in the White House.

But wait. That is not the end of it. USA Today, The Miami Herald and the Knight Ridder newspapers report that if you want to be a stickler, and count only those cleanly punched ballots where the chad is entirely gone, Gore should have won by 3 votes. Hold on, these papers say. We're going to move on to 110,000 "overvotes," those discarded because more than one presidential vote was noted, and we'll get back to you with further results.

And yet more numbers await us. A second consortium, including The Washington Post, is having a second survey research firm conduct a separate and independent recount — and will be weighing in with its own verdict.

All of this is good for history's sake. The expensive effort to learn what all these ballots can tell us, while they are still available and reasonably intact, about one of the closest elections of all time is commendable social science. It's not likely to have any short-term political impact. Bush is in the presidency, however many questions may arise about how he got there, and the public debate has moved from the legitimacy of his election to the wisdom of his policies and actions.

And yet the journalists are not the only ones who can't let go of the last election. Just days earlier than last Wednesday's headlines, the mail brought a copy of PS, a publication of the American Political Science Association, with essays by 19 experts on U.S. politics attempting to explain why the vote had been so close. The profession had suffered a bit of an embarrassment. When the professors had their annual convention last August, a panel of experts deployed



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the "scientific" models they had built to gauge election outcomes, and, as one of them, Thomas Holbrook, acknowledged in PS, unanimously predicted that Gore would win with somewhere between 53 percent and 60 percent of the two-party vote. "Needless to say," Holbrook writes, "the election outcome left a bit of egg on the faces of the academic forecasters."

The efforts to explain what went wrong are nothing if not creative. One brave fellow, Christopher Wlezien of the University of Houston, said that the lesson of 2000 should be plain: "Campaigns matter. They

always have and they always will."

That may not seem startling to you, but a number of these political scientists have developed the notion that all that posturing and planning by candidates and managers, all the debate preparation, all the frantic flying from media market to media market and all the money spent from Labor Day to Election Day basically are wasted motions. Presidential elections, they maintain, are determined by fundamental factors, such as the performance of the economy earlier in the election year or the approval rating of the incumbent president or the degree of competition within the incumbent party's primaries.

Because all these are measurable before Labor Day, they say, they can predict with confidence the outcome of the vote. It turns out they can't. These scholars' models missed Gore's minuscule 50.2 percent margin in the two-party popular vote by a statistical mile. Now they beg leave to revise their formula or recast their work in a more favorable light.

We should have used real disposable income, not gross domestic product figures, say two authors. I should have discounted the favorable economic numbers by the negative turn in coverage of the economy, says another.

I liked what James Campbell of the University at Buffalo wrote. "We should all remember that this election has not been easy for anyone," he said, citing the wavering polls, the miscalls on TV on election night and the struggles of the various courts. "So why should presidential election forecasters have had it any easier? The answer is, we didn't."

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