EDITORIAL

Speed and American elections

"As you love your country, fly to your polls," the *Gazette of the United States* urged voters in 1800, in a presidential election that pitted Thomas Jefferson against John Adams. But voters hardly raced to the polls that year: Balloting began in March and ended in November and the winner was declared only weeks before inauguration. In the centuries since, both voting and counting in the United States have gotten faster, if not always more fair, and this year, the communication of results long before they can possibly be known threatens to undermine not only the election but democracy itself.

Republicans have raised alarms about old-fashioned, well-regulated technologies: the paper ballot and the post office. But the real danger this election comes from newfangled, unregulated social media companies. "What's the Plan if Trump Tweets that He's Won Re-election?" *The New York Times* asked last month. Twitter plans to slow down communications on its platform beginning 20 October. That may be too little, too late.

The push for speed came, first, from newspapers. In 1852, *The New York Times* promised that a new technology of communication, the telegraph, would "enable the Press of the entire country to announce the result of the national election on the morning after the closing of the polls." But as late as 1896, newspapers were still using homing pigeons to collect returns although, by 1904, electricity allowed big-city newspapers headquartered in tall buildings to speed results to the public by way of lights that could be seen for miles (that's what's meant by a "news flash"): Steady light to the west meant a Democratic victory; steady light to the east a Republican one.

The emergence of radio in the 1920s and modern polling in the 1930s made election reporting more frantic and, equally, more prone to error. In 1948, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* famously went to press with the dead-wrong headline, DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN. But the real turn came in 1952 when CBS Television News brought in a UNIVAC computer to predict the outcome of the contest between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. With the introduction of "giant electronic brains" into election-night television coverage, Americans came to expect to learn of the outcome of a presidential election before turning in for the night.

In 1960, all three television networks used computers to make projections in the contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, which proved to be one of the closest elections in American history. On CBS, an IBM 7090 predicted a Kennedy victory at 8:12 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, while polls remained open in much of the country. Republicans pushed for a recount; Nixon decided to concede. Afterward, IBM published a promotional brochure called "The Fastest Reported Election," boasting, "For waiting millions on election night, the computer cut down the time of waiting." Newspapers soon began commissioning computers, too. In 1962, *The New York Times* hired the Simulmatics Corporation, a pioneering predictive analytics company. Simulmatics promised that it could help the newspaper report the results of the mid-term elections in "real time," a term that had been coined by the U.S. Department of Defense, at the height of the Cold War, to explain how computers predicted, by way of simulation, the path and velocity of missiles.

"Haste…has also not infrequently undermined the democratic process."

Ballots aren't bombs. Honestly, what's the hurry? Haste is not in the public interest. It has also not infrequently undermined the democratic process. In 1980, NBC Television News called Ronald Reagan the presidential winner at 8:15 p.m. At 10 p.m., Jimmy Carter conceded. Polls hadn't closed yet in the West, and down-ticket Democrats who lost their races blamed Carter. But, really, NBC was to blame. As a consequence, television networks adopted new rules, barring the calling of elections before the polls close. In 2000, every television network, relying on computer projections, called the presidential election for George W. Bush over Al Gore, leading Gore to concede, prematurely. Again, television networks established new rules.

Media companies fix their mistakes. Journalists work in the public interest. "We are not a media company," Mark Zuckerberg insisted after the 2016 election, deflecting blame. For 2020, Facebook has established a Voting Information Center; one of its purposes, Zuckerberg says, is "to prepare people for the possibility that it may take a while to get official results." That might work. Or, it might not. Either way, after the 3 November election, control of the nation's election reporting needs to be wrested out of Zuckerberg's clutches and returned to journalists.

–Jill Lepore

Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History, Harvard College Professor, and Affiliate Professor of Law at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE MITCHELL/HARVARD UNIVERSITY

10.1126/science.abf1768

Downloaded from http://science.sciencemag.org/ on October 31, 2020

Science

Speed and American elections

Jill Lepore

Science **370** (6514), 267.
DOI: 10.1126/science.abf1768

ARTICLE TOOLS http://science.sciencemag.org/content/370/6514/267

RELATED CONTENT http://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/370/6514/278.full
http://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/370/6514/283.full
http://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/370/6514/284.full

PERMISSIONS http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions

Use of this article is subject to the Terms of Service

Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.

Copyright © 2020 The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works

Downloaded from http://science.sciencemag.org/ on October 31, 2020