Exit Polling: Elections and the Media Lesson

Issue Date: **February 27, 2004**

Exit Polling

The issue: Should exit poll data be released to the public as soon as the data are received by the media? Or should the media wait until voting has ended?

- *Critics of the early release of exit polls say:* Releasing the data before voting has ended discourages those who have not yet voted from doing so, and can affect elections. Journalists withhold information on other sensitive matters, and should do so in the case of exit poll results.
- *Supporters of the early release of exit polls say:* There is no conclusive evidence that releasing data discourages voting. And even if it did, the media should still release the information because releasing information, after all, is the prime purpose of the media.

Getty Images

A worker with the presidential campaign of Democratic contender Sen. John Edwards (N.C.) watches televised exit poll results during the Wisconsin primary in February 2004.

Media coverage of political elections often makes extensive use of public opinion polls. While most polls track the progress of candidates prior to the actual voting, some, known as exit polls, measure the voting itself by interviewing people after they cast their ballots. In recent decades, the release of such information by the media has become the subject of controversy.

Exit pollsters select a representative sample of precincts, then give voters in those precincts forms to fill out as they leave voting stations. In addition to asking voters whom they voted for, the forms contain questions about the demographic characteristics of the voters, such as age and gender, and on why they voted the way they did. That information is used by politicians, researchers and others to learn more about the electorate, and by the television networks to provide additional information for their coverage

Exit polls are also generally recognized as an effective way for television networks, which provide most of the funding for a consortium that conducts exit polls nationally, to predict election winners. The networks receive exit poll results hours before voting is finished, then use the results to project the winners before the returns have all been counted. In closer races, the exit poll results are augmented with actual results, known as returns, from a sample of precincts. In the closest elections, exit polls are usually not considered reliable. (Although exit polls are not accurate 100% of the time, pollsters attempt to make them more accurate through statistical techniques such as calculating a margin of error, a small number of percentage points that represents the difference between the results of the sample and the results that they would get if they had interviewed all voters.)
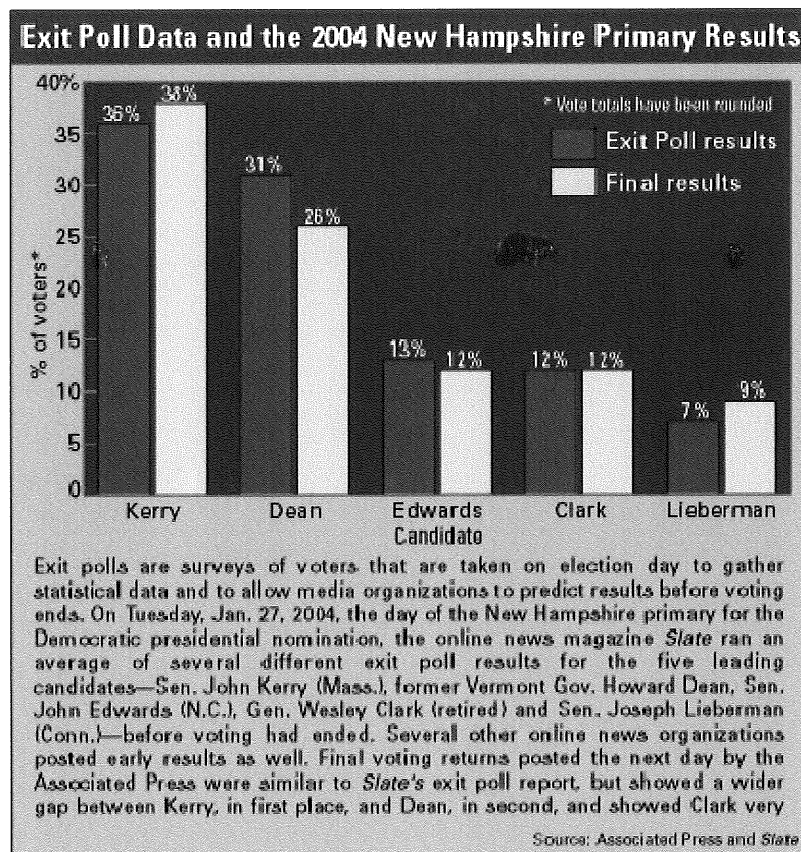
Inaccurate predictions by the networks during the 2000 presidential election, problems with the exit polling computer system and a subsequent overhaul of the process have focused greater attention on exit polling in recent years. The most controversial aspect of exit polls involves the time at which their data are made public. [See 2003 Exit Polling a Source of Controversy (sidebar)]

Exit Polling: Elections and the Media Lesson

Due to a mutual agreement, the networks traditionally refrain from using exit polling results to project winners until all voting has ended. That agreement stems from concerns that making exit poll results public might influence those who have yet to vote. However, in recent elections, some online news providers have begun publishing exit poll results before the end of voting.

Critics of the early publication of exit poll results say that it can depress voter turnout and make voters feel as if their votes do not count. They also question the need for results to be known hours earlier than they otherwise would be. And they warn that the practice of releasing poll results early could become more widespread as increasing numbers of news organizations do so to avoid being outdone by rivals.

Those who advocate the early publishing of exit poll results counter that journalists are not obligated to encourage voter turnout but rather to provide timely information to the public whenever possible. They also express doubt that making the results public tends to discourage voting, and say that the public is capable of intelligently evaluating exit poll data. If there is a problem, it can be circumvented by voters through voting early or avoiding sources of exit poll data before they vote, rather than by infringing on the freedom of the press, supporters argue.

Exit Poll Data and the 2004 New Hampshire Primary Results

Exit polls are surveys of voters that are taken on election day to gather statistical data and to allow media organizations to predict results before voting ends. On Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2004, the day of the New Hampshire primary for the Democratic presidential nomination, the online news magazine *Slate* ran an average of several different exit poll results for the five leading candidates—Sen. John Kerry (Mass.), former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, Sen. John Edwards (N.C.), Gen. Wesley Clark (retired) and Sen. Joseph Lieberman (Conn.)—before voting had ended. Several other online news organizations posted early results as well. Final voting returns posted the next day by the Associated Press were similar to *Slate's* exit poll report, but showed a wider gap between Kerry, in first place, and Dean, in second, and showed Clark very

Source: Associated Press and *Slate*

Jeremy Eagle

Media Use of Exit Polls

Early in the history of televised election coverage, broadcasters sought to make their reporting more timely by supplementing the data provided by returns with speculation based on additional information. Computer models and samples of early returns were used to make predictions, with varying degrees of success. For instance, networks were successful in calling the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections for President Dwight Eisenhower (R, 1953-61), who won election and reelection by a large margin. However, they were ill-equipped to call the much closer 1960 race between Sen. John Kennedy (D, Mass.) and Vice President Richard Nixon (R), won by Kennedy.

Exit polling was developed in the 1960s, in large part by Warren Mitofsky, a pollster who worked for the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). During that period, however, exit polls were used more cautiously than they would later be. Much of the reported results were still based on returns rather than exit poll data,

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and when exit poll data were presented, the results were accompanied by reminders that they represented projections rather than actual counted votes. [See 2003 Exit Polling a Source of Controversy (sidebar)]

The practice of calling results based on exit poll data became controversial after the 1980 election. In that instance, the networks declared Ronald Reagan (R) the winner more than two hours before polls closed in the western U.S. Shortly after the call, and with polls still open, incumbent President Jimmy Carter (D, 1977-81) conceded the election. The media reported that turnout slowed after the networks' call, and Democratic politicians argued that the actions of the networks depressed voting. Some others maintained that the damage to turnout was exaggerated or blamed it on Carter's early concession.

The controversy over the 1980 election led to legislative attempts to regulate the practice of exit polling. A number of states passed laws restricting polling within a specified distance of voting booths. Many of those laws were eventually deemed unconstitutional and overturned. Another outcome was that in 1985, the broadcast networks, under pressure from Congress, agreed to refrain from projecting election winners until polls had closed.

In 1990, in order to save money, a group of prominent media organizations--CBS, Fox Broadcasting, the National Broadcasting Co. (NBC), the American Broadcasting Cos. (ABC), Cable News Network (CNN) and the Associated Press--agreed to collaborate on funding a single source of exit poll data to replace the multiple sources used previously. The new source was originally called Voter Research and Surveys, but became the Voter News Service (VNS) in 1993. Each member of the consortium individually interpreted the data that it received from VNS.

The growth of Internet journalism in the 1990s greatly expanded the number of media sources that were able to publish information immediately after receiving it, but that were not bound by the mutual agreement of the VNS subscribers to refrain from early publication of exit poll data. Early in the primary season of the 2000 election, the online magazine *Slate* began to publish exit polling data before voting had ended. In February, the VNS threatened to sue *Slate* if it continued that practice. *Slate* stopped, but others, including the *National Review* and Internet journalist Matt Drudge, took up the practice.

Election Miscues Spark Changes

Developments later in the 2000 election brought additional attention to exit polling. On election night, exit polls showed Vice President Al Gore (D) leading in the state of Florida. Combining that data with early returns, the networks called Florida for Gore. Later that night, the VNS informed the networks that some of its data were inaccurate, and the number of votes being reported in Florida seemed to be narrowing the gap between Gore and the Republican candidate, Texas Gov. George Bush, prompting the networks to change their projection to "too close to call."

Later still, with the two candidates closely matched in electoral votes and Florida having become decisive, the number of votes that by then had been counted for Bush in Florida led the networks to call the state for him and announce that he had won the election. By early morning, however, more votes had come in for Gore, and the gap between Gore and Bush had narrowed to the point where the networks once again said the election was too close to call. The impasse resulted in a legal battle between Democrats and Republicans that ended with Bush becoming president after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling ended the vote count.

Following the confusion in Florida, the media received substantial criticism for their election night coverage. Some blamed VNS, while others said that the networks themselves were to blame for being too eager to call winners before their competitors did. In response, the VNS subscribers spent more than $10 million on upgrading the system, largely through software improvements.

However, during the 2002 midterm elections, the upgraded VNS computer system did not function properly, and much of the exit poll data were lost. The networks were slow to call winners in the various state and district races; they did not do so until votes were counted. Although the data were eventually recovered, VNS subscribers in early 2003 decided to disband the consortium. It was replaced by the National Election Pool, a system run by Mitofsky and another veteran pollster, Joe Lenski.

Mitofsky and Lenski vowed to implement changes such as applying more data from past races to ensure the accuracy of their exit polling. The 2003 California vote to recall Gov. Gray Davis (D), which Mitofsky and Lenski accurately covered for the networks, was seen by many as confirming the viability of the new exit polling consortium. Coverage of the early 2004 Democratic presidential primaries was also seen as successful. Networks were more hesitant to call races than in the past, however, discontinuing their past practice of attempting to be the first to call winners.

In the 2004 primary races, online publications, including *Slate*, once again provided exit poll data before voting ended. Although they received some criticism from other journalists, they showed no sign of discontinuing the practice.

AGAINST: Critics Worry About Effects of Revealing Data

Those opposed to releasing exit poll data before voting has concluded argue that it has the effect of swaying potential voters. People who are told by the media that the election has already been decided will be less likely to bother to vote, they say, making the media call a self-fulfilling prophecy. "It's easy to imagine a voter on his way to the polls hearing that his candidate is getting creamed, and throwing in the towel...or to envision an undecided voter who is swayed at the last minute by reports of how his neighbors have voted," writes Thomas Lang of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Opponents argue that journalists may not be obligated to promote voter turnout during elections, but ethical considerations should keep them from doing things to actively discourage it. "I believe journalists operating in civil society have a stake in keeping civil society possible. Almost always, the press should avoid promoting voter apathy," Scott Shuger, a *Slate* writer who opposed the early publication of exit poll numbers, wrote during the 2000 election.

Critics contend that discouraging voting affects not only specific races that the media have called but also other issues on the ballot. For example, they say, if projecting a winner early prompts Democratic voters to stay home in a presidential election, other Democratic politicians on the ballot will be hurt as well, and conservative positions on ballot proposals will be given an advantage.

Furthermore, opponents say, journalists often withhold information in sensitive situations. For instance, they note that journalists usually refrain from releasing details of military troop movements, names of confidential sources and crucial evidence in ongoing criminal investigations. Exit poll data revealing election winners should fall under the same category, they argue. "Given that journalists make exceptions to the 'information freedom' imperative, why should protecting the legitimacy of the democratic process not qualify as one of those exceptions?" asks Steve Lovelady, a managing editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Critics also question the purpose of the media when it releases its estimates of election winners immediately. They contend that the public is not harmed by having to wait until votes are counted to learn of election results. Critics add that if online media continue to publish early exit poll data, traditional media will feel compelled to engage in the practice as well. In order to stay competitive, they predict, the online editions of traditional media outlets will increasingly publish exit poll results before voting ends.

Finally, some opponents argue that exit polls negatively affect election coverage. Thomas Patterson, a professor of government and the press at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., is skeptical of arguments that revealing early exit poll data depresses voter turnout, but maintains that broadcasting exit poll results is not the most engaging way of covering elections. Because exit polls offer data that do not fluctuate as much as returns do, he contends, they do not clearly reveal the nuances of which precincts were won by which candidate and are less interesting to follow. "Remarkably, exit polls are not even the most revealing or interesting method of reporting election outcomes," Patterson writes. "Actual vote returns are superior in this respect."

FOR: Early Release of Data Not a Problem, Supporters Say

Those who support the practice of releasing exit poll data before the end of voting say that the numbers are newsworthy and the public should be informed about them. They point out that from the time exit poll data are received by the media until voting booths close, the returns are common knowledge to media and political insiders. That data should not be hoarded by elites, they argue. "This information is all over Washington and the campaign staffs," says *National Review* editor Rich Lowry. "Our attitude is, we're not just going to tell our friends and confidants, we're going to share this news with our readers, too."

Supporters also question the idea that the public at large cannot be trusted with exit poll data. They charge that the media attitude on exit polls is condescending and superior. "Perhaps voters are smarter than the networks and the politicians give them credit for," says Jack Shafer, editor at large for *Slate*.

Furthermore, proponents argue that there is no clear evidence that the early release of exit poll numbers depresses voter turnout. "Does reporting of exit polls while people are still voting sometimes affect the result?" asks *Slate* founding editor Michael Kinsley. "There is no logical reason why this should happen--are you more likely to drop out of line if you hear that your candidate is projected to lose or win?--and no evidence that it does happen."

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And if revealing exit poll data discourages voting, supporters ask, then should other news stories that might affect voting be banned as well? They note that tracking polls are frequently conducted in the months leading up to elections, and that stories containing opinions on the chances of one candidate over another often appear in the media. Since those aspects of election coverage are usually seen as acceptable, they say, exit polls should be as well.

Proponents argue that it is not the responsibility of the media to promote voter turnout. The main concern of election reporters should be with providing information, they say. The timely release of exit poll data is consistent with that concern, they add. "I don't think journalists should worry about whether their stories encourage or discourage voters. It's the job of advocacy groups and the political parties to encourage turnout on one side and depress it on the other. Our job is to tell the truth," Shafer writes.

Supporters contend that the news networks have allowed themselves to be intimidated by Congress into withholding information from viewers. In reality, they say, action against the media by the government would be censorship and would violate the First Amendment. "Why are the networks afraid of Congress, which is constitutionally forbidden to make any law abridging the freedom of the press?" journalist and commentator Daniel Schorr asks in *USA Today.*

Supporters insist that there are measures that can be taken to solve any problems associated with releasing exit poll data. For instance, they say, concerned voters can file absentee ballots ahead of time, vote before the exit poll data is released or refrain from reading or viewing election day coverage until they have voted. At a legislative level, a uniform time could be set for the end of voting, they suggest. Those measures would be preferable to withholding news during elections, supporters say.

Compromise Sought

As the debate over the release of exit poll results continues, some observers advocate a position that falls between always releasing the numbers and always withholding them. For example, J. D. Lasica, a senior editor at the *Online Journalism Review,* suggests that broadcasters refrain from providing the data, but that online media sources should feel free to publish the results on interior pages. That arrangement, he argues, would make the information available to people specifically seeking it, but not to others.

"Clearly, it's not in the public interest when broadcasters reveal real-time results while an election is in progress," Lasica writes. "But the Web is not a broadcast medium. Online users don't passively receive information--they actively seek it out, and elections are especially well-suited to a medium that lets users tease out information that's specific and immediate."

Other observers say that the main service that exit polls provide is to gather comprehensive information about how and why voters cast their ballots, and that their use in forecasting elections is of secondary importance. Such information is important not only to researchers and politicians, they say, but also as an indication of how government works. "Exit polling isn't important because it can be used to call an election a little earlier, or to entertain TV viewers that night," writes Philip Meyer, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. "It's vital because it helps us understand the nature of the electoral coalition that controls our government--and that's absolutely essential."

Discussion Questions & Activities

1) If exit polls indicated that the candidate you intended to vote for had a huge lead, would you still go out and vote?

2) Should exit poll data be released as it is gathered, or should the media have to wait until the voting is concluded? Why or why not?

3) If exit polls tend to be unreliable in predicting the winners of close races--polling was inaccurate both in the 2000 and 2004 presidential races--what is the value of exit polls?

Bibliography

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Lang, Thomas. "From Blog to Web Site to Print?" *Columbia Journalism Review* (Feb. 4, 2004) [accessed Feb. 10, 2004]: www.cjr.org.

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Lasica, J.D. "Forecasting the Ballot: A Clash Over Exit Polls." *Online Journalism Review* (March 6, 2000) [accessed Feb. 11, 2004]: www.ojr.org.

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Schorr, Daniel. "Exit Polling: Why Gag the Media?" *USA Today* (March 10, 2000) [accessed Feb. 10, 2004]: www.usatoday.com.

Shafer, Jack. "All the News That's Fit to Suppress?" *Wall Street Journal* (March 7, 2000) [accessed Feb. 9, 2004]: www.wsj.com.

Shafer, Jack and Scott Shuger. "Should Exit Polls Be Released Before Voting Ends?" *Slate* (March 17, 2000) [accessed Feb. 10, 2004] www.slate.msn.com.

Additional Source

Additional information about exit polling can be found in the following source:

Plissner, Martin. *Control Room: How Television Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections.* New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1999.

Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of exit polling or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

Edison Media Research
6 West Cliff Street
Somerville, N.J. 08876
Telephone: (908) 707-4707
Internet: www.edisonresearch.com

American Association for Public Opinion Research
P.O. Box 14263
Lenaxa, Kan. 66285-4263
Telephone: (913) 310-0118
Internet: www.aapor.org

Key Words and Points

For further information about the ongoing debate over exit polling, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Warren Mitofsky
Voter News Service
Online journalism
National Election Pool

Exit Polling: Elections and the Media Lesson

2 class periods	*Essential Question(s)* How can the media impact society? How can media impact elections, voter behavior and election outcomes?
Objectives	*Students will be able to:* • Develop an argument • Support an argument with evidence from sources • Discuss and debate key ideas and concepts (the role of media in elections)
Instructional materials and resources	• Structured Academic Controversy Organizer • Structured Academic Controversy PowerPoint • Article Exit Polling." *Issues & Controversies On File:* n. pag. *Issues & Controversies.* Facts On File News Services, 27 Feb. 2004. Web. 9 June 2014. <http://www.2facts.com/article/i0900430>. (attached below lesson plan) ❖ Exit Poll Data http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls
Bibliography and additional resources	More background on Structured Academic Controversy http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/nagc_struct_acad_cont.pdf

Instructional activities and tasks	**Day 1**
	
	    <u>Initiation</u>
	    1. **Writing Prompt/Do Now:** How do you think the media influences voters? Throughout a campaign? On Election Day?
	
	    • Students share out responses.
	
	    <u>Activities</u>
	    2. **Exit Polling:** Introduce/review the concept of exit polling and discuss as a class. Read the first 2-3 pages together or provide as notes for the class prior to the activity.
	
	    3. **Structured Academic Controversy Debate Overview:** Introduce the idea of a Structured Academic Controversy Debate to the class using the provided PowerPoint.

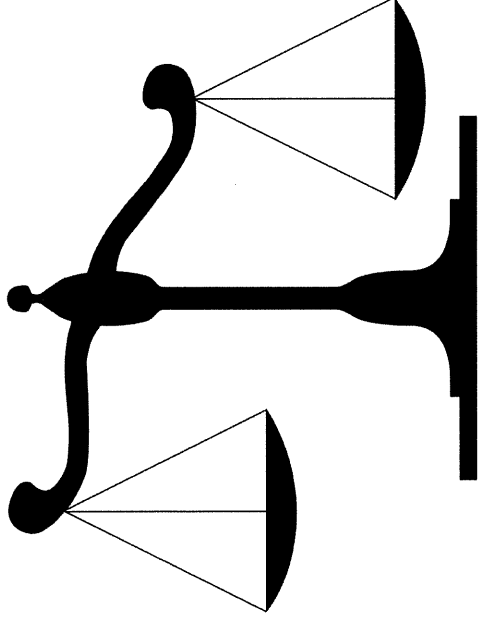|	4. **Structured Academic Controversy Debate organizer:** a)Review the directions and the organizer. Assign students to groups of 4. Two pairs will divide up and each will address one side (for/against). b) Students will use the provided reading to complete the organizer with the best arguments/quotes/details to support their side. *Please note they can also use the introductory part of the reading- not just the section that says for or against.* 5. **Debate (on the next day):** Using their completed organizer and the provided materials, students will participate in the discussion/debate following the directions on the front of the organizer and PowerPoint. *It is helpful to have protocol listed on the board if possible.* <u>Closure</u> 6. **Sharing Consensus Statements:** Students will read their consensus statements to the class, discussing how they came to a conclusion that represents a balanced understanding of the topic. **Optional: Viewing and Discussing Exit Poll data from 2012 using the New York Times data-** http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls **Optional follow-up/homework:** Have students draft an argumentative essay or letter to the editor about their views on exit polling, using their notes from the debate and the provided sources.
Assessments	• **Writing Prompt/Do Now** • **Structured Academic Controversy organizer** • **Consensus write-up** • **Optional (argumentative essay)**

Structured Academic Controversy

Civics

Warm-up

▲ 1. What is a controversy?

▲ 2. How do people resolve differing views on controversial issues?

▲ 3. What is a consensus?

Structured Academic Controversy

▲ **Overview:** *Structured Academic Controversy is a debate style that encourages students to take on and argue for, alternately, **BOTH** sides of a controversial issue and ultimately come up with a **balanced opinion about that issue.***

Steps in the process:

1. Read background information on the topic.

2. Each group of four is divided into two pairs; **each pair is assigned a different position on the controversial issue.**

3. Study your assigned positions and supporting arguments.

4. Present your assigned position and arguments to the other pair.

5. The pairs reverse perspectives: Each pair feeds back the other's assigned stance case until each is satisfied that it has been articulated and understood.

6. Consider the strongest arguments for each side and your own opinion and experience. Come to a **consensus about the topic.**

What is a consensus?

- A general agreement that incorporates the best arguments and approaches to the topic.

Issue: Exit Polling during Elections

Sides

- **For:** Should exit poll data be released to the public as soon as the data are received by the media?

- **Against:** Or should the media wait until voting has ended?

Your task

1. Review the materials in your folder.

2. Complete your organizer for your assigned side

3. Prepare your arguments for the debate.

Type 2: Structured Academic
Controversy Reflection

1. How did you feel about debating, using this format? How did you feel about repeating the other side's arguments back to them?

2. What was the biggest challenge about doing this activity?

3. What would you change about this activity or like to differently, next time? How can I make this work better for you?

Format:

1. 15 minutes to complete notes/arguments

2. 5 minutes for each group to present their side.

3. 3-5 minutes (each) to repeat arguments back to the other side

4. 10 minutes-Discuss and debate

5. Write your consensus as a group
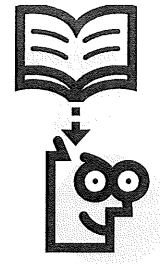
STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY

Overview: *Structured Academic Controversy is a debate style that encourages students to take on and argue for, alternately, **BOTH** sides of a controversial issue and ultimately come up with a **balanced opinion about that issue**.*

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3. Study your assigned positions and supporting arguments.

4. Present your assigned position and arguments to the other pair.

5. The pairs reverse perspectives: Each pair feeds back the other's assigned stance case until each is satisfied that it has been articulated and understood.

6. Consider the strongest arguments for each side and your own opinion and experience. Come to a **consensus about the topic.**

What is a consensus? *A general agreement that incorporates the best arguments and approaches to the topic.*

Name_____
Period:_____

STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY ORGANIZER

Issue: *Exit Polling* **(For and Against)**

Sides
For: **Should exit poll data be released to the public as soon as the data are received by the media?**
Against: **Or should the media wait until voting has ended?**

Assigned Side: _____

Our best **arguments/evidence** to support our side:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Notes and important points after hearing the opposing view:

Best arguments for the opposing view:

1.

2

3.

4.

The **consensus statements** related to our issue: