NEWS RELEASE
CALIFORNIA SECRETARY OF STATE KEVIN SHELLEY

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Secretary of State Shelley Urges Media to Withhold Network Projections until Polls Close in California

SACRAMENTO -- Secretary of State Kevin Shelley urged television and radio networks today to refrain from issuing exit polling data and projections of winners in Tuesday's presidential election until polls have closed at 8 p.m. in California.

"Dating back to at least 1980, there are instances of premature projections of winners reducing voter participation in the western United States and of voter sentiment objecting to these projections when they occur prior to the closing of polls in California," said Shelley in his letter to the networks. "In light of these examples, I am asking you – in the name of maximizing voter participation -- to refrain from projecting winners until all polling places in the contiguous United States have closed."

Shelley is one of many state chief election officials who has urged networks over the years to refrain from issuing exit poll data and projections of winners while polls remain open.

The most famous example of a premature announcement affecting voter behavior in California occurred in 1980 when NBC projected Ronald Reagan had defeated incumbent Jimmy Carter for the presidency. ABC and CBS followed with their own projections shortly thereafter, and Carter officially conceded at 6:50 p.m. Pacific Time – more than an hour before the polls in California closed. According to a study by The Field Institute, 10 percent of those questioned blamed premature projections by the media for their failure to vote, and voter turnout dropped between 2 and 3 percentage points.

Shelley noted, "In past presidential elections, we have seen voter turnout drop off measurably when the networks began announcing winners based on East Coast voter behavior and exit polls. Californians deserve to have an equal say in the selection of their national leaders and, equally importantly, the ballot measures and candidates unique to California's ballot deserve voter decisions."

A copy of the Secretary of State Shelley's letter to the network and cable presidents is attached.

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SECRETARY OF STATE
KEVIN SHELLEY
STATE OF CALIFORNIA

October 30, 2004

Dear Network Executive:

I am writing you today to renew a request that has been made time and again by state election officials like myself for radio and television networks to refrain from releasing exit poll data and from issuing projections of winners in Tuesday's election races until polls have closed at 8 pm PST.

Dating back to at least 1980, there are instances of premature projections of winners reducing voter participation in the western United States and of voter sentiment objecting to these projections when they occur prior to the closing of polls in California.

In light of these examples, I am asking you – in the name of maximizing voter participation and in the name of ensuring every vote is cast -- to refrain from issuing exit poll data and from projecting winners until all polling places in the contiguous United States have closed.

All of us should be painfully aware of what happened in 1980 when NBC projected Ronald Reagan to defeat incumbent Jimmy Carter for the presidency. ABC and CBS followed with their own projections shortly thereafter and Carter officially conceded at 6:50 p.m. Pacific Time – more than an hour before the polls in California closed. According to a study by The Field Institute, 10 percent of those questioned blamed premature projections by the media for their failure to vote and voter turnout dropped between 2 and 3 percentage points.

The combined negative effects of early winner projections not only displease citizens who haven't yet voted, but also actually decrease their incentive to vote at all, potentially skewing the results of many ballot contests, especially those expected to be close.

No competitive pressure in the marketplace for a network to be 'first' in predicting a winner can conceivably justify the potential for discouraging voter participation and for directly impacting the results themselves.

Sincerely,

KEVIN SHELLEY
Secretary of State
State of California

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