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Orwell’s 1984 and the Lonely World of Campaign Management

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One of the great dreams of western democracy is a vision of an informed electorate, able to base its decisions upon a reasoned evaluation of candidates and their issues. One of our great nightmares is the inversion of that vision, complete with an uninformed populace making non-rational (or even irrational) choices. And one of the great expressions of that nightmare is Orwell’s 1984.

Its author was an unusual social critic. From the moment his novel appeared 35 years ago, it attracted a devoted following among the political Right, who cheered what they saw as a thinly veiled denunciation of Stalinism and the Left. In practice, however, Orwell was a supporter of the British Labor Party, and his sympathies lay somewhere within the broad confines of social democracy. Early marketers of his volume often treated it as a romance, stressing the sexuality he wove into his plot. Yet Orwell intended to title his work The Last Man in Europe as a reminder of the humanistic thrust he wished to project. Interpreters ever since have faced similar struggles trying to categorize both the man and his ideas.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that Orwell chose a title that appeared to proclaim him a futurist, while much of the novel appears to be poor prophecy. The scarcity and enforced rationing that he had experienced in the 1940s yielded to the mass marketed prosperity of the 1950s and ‘60s, and the direct conflict of superpowers that he had known gave way to smaller surrogate wars. The mind-numbing bureaucracy and food cafeterias food he portrayed may be found in most high schools, but are much less apparent to a modern “high tech/high touch” society. The modern west, in short, failed to adopt the most flagrant manifestations of his dystopian vision.

Still, Orwell has survived well. His book is found on every list of significant modern political novels, and its paperback edition soared back up the best-seller charts as the actual year of 1984 arrived. Something about his portrayal of a totalitarian bureaucracy remains strangely plausible and compelling. Something still causes us to ask if it could happen here. Something that he saw in the politics of 1948 is still able to engage our attention. It’s worth asking what that was.

The year 1948 saw many interesting political events, including the presidential contest that pitted Harry Truman against Tom Dewey. Roosevelt was dead, and the GOP was already showing signs of the strength that would allow them to win five of the first nine post-war elections for president and to closely contest three others. It was also one of the first elections to be closely monitored by the new profession of public opinion research. Scientific surveys were little more than a decade old. But some of the more visible pollsters were already gaining headlines with studies that the press frequently, albeit mistakenly, called predictions. The most notable, of course, was the six percent October lead that Gallup called for Dewey. Some interpreted the ensuing Truman victory as proof that the “pollsters are wrong”, but the pollsters more accurately interpreted that election as proof they needed to refine and tighten their procedures — and shun any claims to prophecy.

The consequences of those decisions are well known to us today. Any professional market opinion firm can now guarantee that with a proper sampling technique they can measure voter opinion at a given time with a margin of error of no more than plus or minus 3% in 19 tries out of 20. It isn’t always cheap: a good survey can cost upwards of $10,000. And any buyer of a survey is well advised to have the firm’s best mind analyze the data before using it. Yet, with cautions of that type, a new world of insights has opened to us in the last three decades.

Much of what we have learned has served simply to confirm the pluralism of American society. We know that differences of attitude by region, income, education, race, and religion are all realties of our time — although not always by the margins we’d expect. We know that these differences all show correlation with voter choice, and even with the decision whether to vote at all. At the same time we’ve seen many of the stereotypes of political analysis crumble. We know, for example, that the modern mass rally is as often the result of improved mobilization of existing constituencies as it is the result of new issues or enlarged public concern. And we’ve become suspicious of the idea of electoral mandates since noting that many voters do not share the views of their candidates on a variety of specific issues.

More significant for our discussion, we’ve learned two key features of the electorate that are deeply disturbing to anyone raised in traditional democratic rhetoric. Simply put, the electorate isn’t always consistent, and the electorate isn’t always well informed. The consistency theme became particularly apparent in the 1960s when a series of studies showed voters straddling key issues of principle and policy. Free and Cantril, for example, found majorities of Americans “conservative” on most matters of principle, “liberal” on most matters of policy, and little concerned about any inconsistency. The knowledge theme appeared regularly as pollsters asked questions of specific information, and then
reported the percentages of people who appeared to lack the most elementary factual data. Name recognition tests showed incumbent U. S. Senators unknown to half their adult constituents, and one test showed half of graduating high school seniors unable to give the correct number of U. S. Senators from their state.

Such findings, of course, are typical of the information that has come to the attention of political managers, and come at a time when it's possible to convert survey information into vote production. There has been a quiet revolution in campaign mechanics in the last quarter century that has allowed a new generation of technocrats to supplement, or even supplant, the old party organizations. Many of these new managers are specialists within a specialty, dealing with direct mail, telephone banks, paid media, or fund raising. All have become skilled in converting numbers into votes.1

Theolk of the field pays homage to a handful of campaigns that have become a paradigm for subsequent races. Republicans, for example, like to harken back to Nelson Rockefeller's 1966 re-election bid for governor in New York. Rocky entered the race a clear underdog, widely disliked even within his party. But careful polling identified first pollution and then education as "soft" issues he could capitalize upon — and a series of skillful television ads, including a simulated interview with a fish, exploited those issues to set him on the road to a narrow victory.

Democrats are fond of citing campaigns by Matt Reese as one of their models. Reese's approach is to use massive telephone banks, staffed by minimum wage employees, to contact voters among those groups and in those areas that surveys suggest could become favorable to his causes. But careful polling identified first pollution and then education as "soft" issues he could capitalize upon — and a series of skillful television ads, including a simulated interview with a fish, exploited those issues to set him on the road to a narrow victory.

The role of the new technocrats is most apparent in presidential elections. Since Theodore White's best seller, The Making of the President, 1960,2 showed how campaigns develop a life of their own, we've experienced an increasing flood of insider's and observer's accounts that convey the contemporary logic of politics. We know, for example, that Ronald Reagan's decision to oppose the Panama Canal treaty in GOP primaries in 1979 was made after a focus group pinpointed the issue for him; that most national television advertising in 1980 was concentrated upon local stations in key electoral vote states; or that Jesse Jackson found intensive advertising over radio stations that offer rhythm and soul programming to be the best tool for turning out voters from a segmented media market. The Ferraro nomination followed hard upon the polster's discovery of the "gender gap".

The same trend recurs at the state and local level where growing numbers of campaign managers are emulating the national trend setters. Jesse Helms became the "six million dollar man" through targeted direct mailings in his 1978 campaign, even if he had to use over 80% of that sum to cover direct mail costs. George Duekemjian tipped the scales in California by a carefully reported the percentages of people who appeared to lack the most elementary factual data. Name recognition tests showed incumbent U. S. Senators unknown to half their adult constituents, and one test showed half of graduating high school seniors unable to give the correct number of U. S. Senators from their state.

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NOTES
4. The journal, Campaigns and Elections, offers the most varied coverage of these developments, with heavy stress upon fund raising considerations.
5. (New York: Pocket Books, 1961)
6. The journal, Public Opinion, is particularly good at covering these developments and in relating them to survey data reports.

The New South African Constitution and Relations Between the Nonwhite Populations

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The issue of the preservation of "white civilization" in South Africa has been openly debated since the end of World War II. Alarmed by the increasing numbers of nonwhite people in the urban areas, White voters elected a Nationalist Party Government committed to apartheid which its leaders originally described as a permanent solution. The difficulties that South Africa has experienced, both domestically and internationally, since the early 1960s are a clear expression of the failure of apartheid to achieve its expectations. In 1977 the Nationalist Party government under the leadership of P. W. Botha began promoting reforms and the development of a new constitution which was implemented fully in September, 1984. The growing cooperation between African and the Colored and Asian populations has been one of the factors that has served both as a stimulant to change and an influence on its direction. Racial divisions had until the 1970s largely precluded a workable level of nonwhite unity.

The new constitution, adopted in a White referendum on November 2, 1983, creates the appearance of movement away from exclusively White rule to a system of shared power with the Colored and Asian populations. The tricameral parliament being created provides for separate bodies for the White, Colored and Asian peoples. Prime Minister Botha has stated: "A new basis for National unity has been established upon which evolutionary reform accompanied by stability can be built. . . . South Africa has made an appointment with the future by voting 'Yes'." Since the new system essentially maintains White power unchecked and leaves Africans totally out of the national structure, few observers regard the new constitution as a long term solution to White problems of governance. It is the purpose of this paper to examine briefly the issues the new structure raises for interracial cooperation among Africans, Colored and Asians. The matter is of major significance, because a united opposition to White rule based on race would put the present structure under even more serious domestic strain.

The new constitution was promoted as a positive step in sharing power