Aiming a Rifle and Missing Millions:

Campaign Polling in Contemporary Politics

Steven E. Schier

Carleton College

A paper presented at the Conference on Polling and Campaigns, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance, Hubert Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, February 27, 2006
This paper centers on the distinction between two words. Their different meanings explain the deleterious effect of contemporary campaign practices – including campaign polling – on popular rule in America. The first word is mobilization, defined here as the partisan method of stimulating very high turnout in elections during the period of peak party power that lasted from 1876 to 1892. The second word is activation, meaning the more contemporary methods that parties, interest groups and candidates employ to induce particular, finely targeted portions of the public to become active in elections, demonstrations, and lobbying.

The two terms reveal very differing processes by which political elites engage the public. First, the two processes differ in their focus. The partisan mobilization of the past was inclusive, seeking to arouse all possible voters to vote in response to a direct partisan message. Activation, conversely, is exclusive by design. Candidates, interests and consultants carefully identify those in the public most likely to become active on their behalf and then employ a variety of inducements to stimulate the action. Polling is a central technology in this process. New communication technology makes such micro targeting possible and allows elites to expend resources in arousing the public far more efficiently – and narrowly -- than in the days of mobilization.

The two processes also differ in their agents, or sources of stimulation of the public. Mobilization was a heavily partisan process, dominated by strong party organizations and party messages. Politics centered on elections, and most voters viewed electoral choice as a partisan choice. In contrast, thousands of different organizations and individuals attempt activation today. Individual candidates now make their own personal
appeals to an electorate uninterested in parties. A dizzying array of interest groups seeks to impart selective information and activism expertise to their potential supporters in the public. Parties still get out a message during elections, but it often gets lost in the competitive din of activation appeals. Campaign pollsters are vital in targeting campaign messages in this environment.

The processes also differ in their *method*. Partisan mobilization involved broad appeals often carried through personal conversation with local party workers, or through America’s then highly partisan press. In contrast, activation is research-driven by polling and focus groups, allowing the activators to target precisely those most likely to respond to appeals. Activation employs telephones, direct mail and Internet communication in a way that allows distinctively phrased messages of maximum possible impact. It does not seek to get most potential voters to participate in an election, as does mobilization, but instead fires up a small but potentially effective segment of the public to help a particular candidate at the polls or a particular interest as it lobbies government.

Finally, the processes differ in their *impact on popular rule in America*. Partisan mobilization encouraged heavy turnouts of eligible voters, most of whom cast a clear and decisive ballot for one of the two major parties in an election. A simple, direct electoral verdict allowed for a relatively clear correspondence between the views of voters and the actions of government. Activation has no such representative function. It works to further the purposes of particular political elites during elections and when they lobby government, regardless of what most citizens think or desire. It is now possible for candidates, parties and interests to rule without serious regard to majority preferences as expressed at the polls. Through campaign polling, limited segments of the public are
targeted for great elite attention while citizens unlikely to vote are ignored. As one campaign pollster put it in 1998: “Who cares what every adult thinks? It’s totally not germane to this election” (Broder and Edsall 1998, A1).

-- Mobilization Politics in the Nineteenth Century --

Parties were strong in the late nineteenth century because they proved to be useful instruments for politicians to employ in achieving their goals. Electoral politicians have three primary goals: gaining reelection, making substantively good public policy and achieving influence within government (Fenno, 1973). John Aldrich argues that “ambitious politicians turn to the political party to achieve such goals only when parties are useful vehicles for solving problems that cannot be solved effectively, if at all, by other means” (1995, 5). Unlike today, local party organizations in the late 1800s proved very useful to politicians in attaining their goals. Back then, politicians could effectively pursue their goals through “one stop shopping” with the party of their choice. Party organizations provided nominations for office, had loyal voters ready to vote for the nominee, funded the campaigns, and even administered the process of voting at the polls on Election Day. In government, they determined the distribution of authority within legislatures and had great influence over many executive branch appointments. Parties controlled thousands of patronage jobs in state, local and national government, given the loyal party workers as a material award for service. Just about all of the ambitious politicians of the 1870s and 1880s worked through the major parties to achieve their goals.
Voters found parties quite useful as well. The electorate, comprised of many new immigrants to America, was not at all well educated. The electorate grew enormously during this period, expanding fifty percent from 1880 to 1896 (Kornbluth 2000, 40). Less than one in ten voters had even a high school education. Many voters needed guidance in navigating America’s complex elections, and political parties provided that guidance. By casting a simple party-line vote, a new voter could pick a governing team with which he agreed on policy and that often provided voters with material benefits in the form of government jobs, local services and even an Election Day financial bonus.\(^1\)

Parties also provided a major form of inclusive popular entertainment in the form of partisan rallies, parades, picnics and banquets. In an era before TV, radio or movies, such local celebrations allowed voters to socialize and relax at party expense. Party events drew large and diverse crowds. Moisei Ostrogorski, a political scientist of the time, described an inclusive partisan celebration: “all classes of the population are represented, from the princes of finance down to the common people; heads of business firms and members of the bar fall in, shouting themselves hoarse, in honor of the candidates of the party, just like ordinary laborers” (Ostrogorski 1902, 2:333-4).

The two major political parties were strongly competitive in each region of the country in the 1870s and 1880s. No president elected from 1876 through 1892 received a majority of the popular vote and Congress usually was closely divided between the parties. Each party had a strong incentive to find and recruit as many possible voters as they could. This produced a remarkably inclusive method of rousing voters for election: partisan mobilization. Each party extensively communicated with the entire electorate during the campaign season, unlike tightly targeted present-day campaign communication.
It was rational for parties to pursue inclusive strategies back then, because the political technologies that permitted campaigns to identify and contact swing voters without contacting the entire electorate – polling and spot TV and radio advertising – had yet to be invented. Faced with competitive elections and an inability to target communications efficiently, it made sense for the parties to contact everybody who might vote.

Jeremiah Jenks, a late nineteenth century political scientist, explained how party committees undertook widespread contact with voters: “Before the election, arrangements are made by each local committee to canvass thoroughly the voters in the locality; to make a list containing all their names, with the parties to which they belong; to mention who are doubtful and, in consequence, are open to persuasion of any kind; and to give any other information regarding individual voters that will be of use in the coming election. . . . It is not too much to say that in important elections in doubtful states, every voter is individually looked after by local committees” (Jenks 1896, 26-7). In the closely fought presidential elections of the period, most states were “doubtful,” leading parties to contact personally most voters during the campaign season.

Party contact worked well because party identification often overlapped with other well-established cleavages in America. It was a nation of homogenous neighborhoods whose residents often shared a common faith, form of employment, newspaper and party identification. In these neighborhoods, the favored local party contacted everyone at election time and provided governmental assistance and popular entertainment between elections. Party voting became a way of demonstrating community allegiance (Schier 2000, 60-61).
This inclusive, enthusiastic partisan politics stimulated “as full a mobilization of the mass electorate as this country has ever experienced” (Kleppner, 1982, 33). Over three-quarters of eligible voters cast ballots in Presidential elections from 1876 to 1892, over half voted in off-year Congressional elections (1982, 33). This high turnout is particularly remarkable given that the electorate was young (in 1870, 48.5 percent of voters were under thirty-five) and, by today’s standards, uneducated (in 1890, only five and one-half percent of the electorate had graduated from high school and less than two percent were college graduates) (1982, 36). The high turnout occurred across class, ethnic and religious lines (1982, 38). In comparison, recent turnout rates seem anemic, reaching sixty percent only once since 1968 (McDonald and Popkin 2001, 966). Not coincidently, this period of low turnout coincides with the advent of modern campaign practices – TV and radio advertising, individualized campaigns and extensive polling by major candidates.

The broader historical trend suggests that events during two periods -- from 1896 to about 1920 and from 1968 to the present -- deflated voting (Schier 2003, 57). The first era of decline witnessed the rise of the Progressive reform movement that instigated reforms such as voluntary voter registration and nonpartisan elections that helped to weaken parties and lower turnout. The era also witnessed the collapse of competitive elections in many states and regions in national politics, further depressing turnout. The more recent period included the rise of television as a campaign tool, an explosion of interest groups and the dominance of candidate-centered campaigns. The central strategic tool of modern campaigns is polling, which identifies which citizens are vital to
victory and which safely can be ignored. All of these forces helped to produce America’s distinctively low turnout in recent elections.

--- Contemporary Campaign Politics –

Modern campaigns differ from the mobilization efforts of the partisan era in three fundamental ways. First, candidates operate more individually, less as part of a partisan organizational effort. Second, the tools for success are much more expensive than those employed one hundred years ago. Third, because of the first two factors, candidates have very strong incentives to target the electorate carefully, given their limited resources. GOP political consultant Frank Luntz explains contemporary campaign strategy: “As campaign costs continue to spiral upwards, the necessity to target voters accurately and send them the right message at the lowest possible cost has become crucial. As a result, there is a trend in political campaigning toward dividing and subdividing the electorate into smaller, more narrowly defined subsections” (Luntz, 1988, 200). Candidates for office operate as independent entrepreneurs with limited resources marketing themselves to prospective primary and general election voters. At their disposal are many tools for gathering all-important financial resources, researching the preferences of voters, and persuading voters to cast their lot with the right candidate. The candidate and his/her campaign have a strong incentive to deploy these tools as efficiently as possible in a harshly competitive environment.

These incentives explain much of the difference between activation and mobilization. During the partisan era, more primitive election tools, combined with party organization strength, produced a much more inclusive style of campaigning. The art of
targeting remained primitive, resulting in partisan campaigning that produced a greater public involvement in parties and elections. Daniel M. Shea calls this approach a “shotgun” strategy aimed at reaching as many people as possible with partisan appeals involving the concerns of most voters. By contemporary standards, this was hopelessly inefficient: “it did little to link the right message with the right person” (Shea, 1996, 9). Today, candidate-centered campaigns employ rifles, not shotguns, aimed at finding and pushing the right message for the right voter: “no word better captures the tactics of modern campaigning than ‘targeting’”(Shea, 1996, 8-9). The arrival of better voter targeting techniques and new incentives for campaigns independently to pursue voter targets caused activation to supplant mobilization.

-- The Tools of the Trade --

The consulting business includes many firms of varying size that assist candidates in performing three campaign functions. First, an effective campaign runs on accurate knowledge of the citizens most likely to determine its fate. The “knowledge firms” include those that provide database management for turnout and fundraising and a variety of voter research services: polling, focus groups and audience research. Second, adequate funding is the sine qua non of a successful campaign, and current campaign finance laws make securing adequate funding a very time-consuming activity. The “money firms” specialize in fundraising by direct mail and other techniques. Third, a successful candidate must market him/herself well through a variety of media. The “media firms” include those specializing in television spots, radio commercials, direct mail to voters and media buying. Thirty years ago, a candidate for statewide office might
hire a general consulting firm to handle all of these tasks. Given the growing specialization of the profession, major candidates now usually hire separate knowledge, money and media specialists.

Few Americans have heard of database management firms, and little do unsuspecting citizens realize how much information about them these companies collect for campaign use. Database management firms work year-in and year-out to create good “lists” for use by campaigns. The quality of the lists improves the quality of the targeting, thus making campaign activation more effective. A good list is one that will “yield” a highly positive response for a campaign. This helps direct mail, telephone canvassing, and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts. A leading database firm is Aristotle Industries, which can provide detailed subsets of voters requested by campaigns. As Shawn Harmon of Aristotle observes: “as a result, searching for all female Democrat voters who are over 65 years old is not a problem” (Friedenberg, 1997, 96). The firms are gaining steadily more information about voters, recently developing the ability to identify homeowners and whether a child is present in the home (Friedenberg, 1997, 95-99). The 2004 Bush reelection campaign demonstrated the current “state of the art” in voter identification: “The effort went as far as to try to pinpoint likely voters based on their shopping habits and magazine subscriptions” (Ceaser and Busch 2005, 133).

The largest number of “knowledge” firms includes those involved in voter research. The most common form of this is survey research or polling, provided by dozens of firms nationally. Any serious candidate for major office first needs a “benchmark” poll, costing about $30,000 and involving sixty-five to seventy detailed questions about the candidate and his/her likely opponents. This first, comprehensive
poll gives a campaign important strategic information about the effort’s strengths and weaknesses. Adverse findings in a benchmark poll have ended many a budding campaign. As the campaign progresses, the candidate may commission a series of "brushfire" polls done every week or two to determine if the campaign's themes are affecting targeted voters in the desired way. A better-funded campaign may do nightly "tracking polls" that give more thorough results concerning the campaign’s persuasive efforts. A “quick-response” poll also may be commissioned in response to a dramatic event that might affect the campaign and its message or in response to a new advertisement by the campaign or a rival. To supplement polls, firms also commission focus groups, aggregations of selected (often swing) voters who discuss the candidates and issues in depth with a moderator over a two-hour period. Many pollsters believe such in-depth discussions, videotaped by the campaign, adds further depth to the public opinion results found in surveys (Shea, 1996, 124-5).

Well-funded campaigns frequently employ instant audience response systems, or “dial groups,” to assess campaign commercials, debates and speeches. A group of from fifteen to one hundred carefully selected voters receives a dial that they employ to register approval (100 on the dial), neutrality (50) or disapproval (0) with the ads, comments or behavior of a candidate they watch on videotape or on live television. Consultants Richard Maullin and Christine Quick, who specialize in audience response systems, provide the following example: “We recruited undecided swing voters during the Los Angeles mayoral campaign in 1993 and showed them ads from the leading candidates. The quantitative results of the session showed one candidate’s ads were much more effective with this key group than any of the others. With this up-to-the-
A related technology, the “mall group” involves showing mock ads to targeted swing voters recruited in shopping malls. This technique, perfected by President Clinton’s pollsters Mark Penn and Doug Schoen, provided essential strategic information for his 1996 reelection campaign.

An ethically more suspect sort of research is the “push poll.” This term actually applies to two distinct campaign practices. The less controversial method of push polling involves early polling about positive and negative characteristics of the candidates in order to determine which bits of information seem to change voters’ candidate preferences. A sample question: “If you learned that [candidate A] opposes a woman’s right to choose an abortion, would this make you more or less likely to support him?” (Sabato and Simpson, 1996, 246). This allows candidates to assess their own and their opponent’s vulnerabilities and to discover promising bits of negative information for future advertising. A more suspect form of push polling is actually a media or persuasion strategy. Phone banks on the eve of an election call voters and disclose sensational and often misleading information about a particular candidate in order to push people to vote for his/her opponent. Here is an example from the 1994 Florida Governor’s race, targeted at the Republican candidate, Jeb Bush: “Bush’s running mate has advocated the abolition of Social Security and called Medicare a welfare program that should be cut. We just can’t trust Jeb Bush and [lieutenant governor nominee] Tom Feeney” (Sabato and Simpson, 1996, 257). Many tightly contested races feature this nasty variant of push polling.
Campaign pollsters are vital in the strategic sequence of modern campaigns. “Testing the message” involves a cycle of polling, perhaps accompanied by focus groups and dial groups. Major campaigns usually have two or three consultants working collaboratively as a brain trust: a pollster, a media specialist, and perhaps a generalist campaign manager. In the early phases, a benchmark poll helps to identify candidate image and issue strengths and weaknesses, and supporters, opponents and undecideds in the electorate. During mid-campaign, a series of polls with fewer questions than the benchmark poll permits a test of how well the campaign is meeting its targeted goals. These polls also allow a campaign to fish for issues to employ in the campaign, often by using push-poll questions. As the election nears, polling aims at defining the “persuadables” to target with appropriate media. Better-funded campaigns will do tracking polls during the final weeks to assess daily how well they are hitting their targets in the electorate (Hamilton, 1995, 170-77).

Who are the “persuadables” who get so much attention? “These late-deciders tend to be the least-interested, least knowledgeable, least partisan of the voters who ultimately cast their ballots” (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1997, 62). How do they tend to make up their minds? According to consultant Joel Bradshaw, their final selection “is made more on the traits and characteristics of the candidates, and issues serve as a backdrop” (Bradshaw, 1995, 38). Important traits for these swing voters include incumbency, party ideology and candidate style or image. Careful voter research can yield the best possible appeal the campaign can make to this target audience. Then, the message must arrive as intended by the campaign.
A survey of campaign pollsters found that they had confidence in public judgment but that 67.5 percent thought the public was poorly informed (Thurber, Nelson Dulio 2000, 17). Low levels of information provide persuasive opportunities for campaigns, making campaign polling central to election outcomes.

-- Polling in Initiative Politics --

Professional political consultants hired by organized interests dominate initiative politics (Magleby and Patterson, 1998, 167). Though groups can phrase the proposition as they wish, voters have little information and are subject to volatile changes of opinion. As one initiative consultant puts it: “they filter conflicting interpretations of the issue and its ramifications. The result can be a wild rollercoaster ride. Major shifts in voter preferences, which might take weeks to develop in a candidate campaign, can occur virtually overnight in a ballot measure campaign” (Mandabach, 1995, 19). Groups that can contain this volatility and direct voter preferences effectively have a large advantage. Money is the essential resource for framing the issue well and pressing the message home to an inattentive electorate. Ability to spend promotes success at each step of the initiative process.

First, what should the wording of the proposition be? Consultants can pretest ballot questions to determine which versions are most acceptable to the public. Wording the question well allows pollsters to employ its language in poll questions, making their surveys a more reliable indicator of the initiative result. The 1994 Save Our Sealife campaign in Florida is a case in point. Before gathering signatures for the initiative, consultants “did extensive testing in polls and focus groups designed to produce ballot
language that was brief enough to avoid troubling voters, but just detailed enough to elicit voter interest and sympathy” (Hill, 1995, 30). This wording also allowed for accurate polling and helped to ensure a large majority in support of the initiative. Once persuasive wording is created, ballot access is the next hurdle. This aspect has been professionalised as well. Over 60 percent of signature gathering efforts in initiatives are professional, usually by firms charging up to $5 per signature (Campaigns and Elections, 1994, 33-4). During the actual campaign, ads are carefully crafted via polling and focus groups in order to get across a “winning message to people who have limited attention spans” (Sonis, 1994, 63). Mobilizing the entire voting age population is not the task here; rather, it involves activating a majority of likely voters to support your side of an initiative campaign.

Once the ballot is set, voters receive a thick pamphlet detailing the contents of the initiatives, written in very technical prose. One survey found that “most voters do not read the pamphlet or use it as a source of information for decisions on propositions” (Magleby, 1984, 146). Other states with initiatives put out similar guides. That makes television advertising the key to the fate of particular propositions, particularly in larger states, and television advertising, as we have seen, is quite expensive. Given the propensity of voters to vote “no” to unfamiliar proposals, the cost of getting a proposition approved is quite high. Money does not always produce initiative success for big spenders. But it does determine agenda access and thus structures the entire pattern of manipulation that characterizes initiative campaigns (Gerber, 1999; Zisk, 1987). Money for campaign polling that guides the targeting of messages to voters is central to success in initiative politics.
A web page of a political consultant trumpets the importance of his services to a successful campaign. Polling, he argues, “can test various messages, candidate strengths and policy initiatives to determine which ones are the most effective at swaying undecided voters, without destabilizing a candidates’ current base vote” (Fallon 2005, 1). Implicit in this effort is the demand for efficient allocation of resources that promotes the imperative of targeted campaign appeals: “financial and electoral needs promote greater attention to citizens who might be active even without recruitment efforts” (Gershtenson 2003, 294). The core fact of contemporary politics is that candidates have limited resources and confront a competitive environment involving large uncertainties. Polling thus becomes a vital technology in reducing those uncertainties and facilitating efficient allocation of campaign resources. This makes money for campaign pollsters and wins races for candidates. It also produces a politics of targeted activation that engages a far smaller portion of eligible voters than did the party mobilization of the late nineteenth century.

Then, party elites had to encourage rule by popular majorities in order to gain power. The dictates of majority preferences, evident in the partisan verdict of the election, directed elected officials’ actions on policy. Campaign technology required generic partisan messages, delivered “shotgun” style. Conceptually simple and based on personal contact, the message encouraged great participation from a public with strong and widespread partisan commitments and voting norms. In the partisan era, despite its corruption, what the public of possible voters thought was very germane to an election.²
In contemporary America, activation is not about majority rule. Parties, interests and campaigns motivate strategic minorities, often those with unrepresentative and particularly intense attitudes, to vote, call, write, contribute or demonstrate. Modern communication technology permits finely honed retail messages conveyed efficiently to targeted segments of the public – a “rifle” communication style (Shea, 1996, 9). Rifles expend less lead and energy and hit targets more precisely than shotguns. That is why everyone in politics uses them today. Their focused fire misses many citizens -- campaign pollsters insure that result.

---

1 My shift from female to male pronouns is intentional here. Though a majority of voters today are female, women did not receive a national guarantee of suffrage until the passage of the twentieth amendment to the Constitution in 1919. The electorate in the 1870s and 1880s was restricted to males only.

2 Of course, the electorate during the partisan era of the late nineteenth century was restricted to white males over the age of twenty-one. They constituted the public of all possible voters. The point here is that they figured much more prominently in the calculations of politicians then than the public of all possible voters does today. Why? Because partisan mobilization stimulated a much larger proportion of possible voters to visit the polls than are so stimulated by today’s finely tuned activation strategies.
References


Gerber, Elizabeth R. The Populist Paradox: Interest Group Influence and the


