

# Campaigns and the new technology

## Television, computers and behavioral science are combining to revolutionize the political process

by James Moriarity

*"McCluskey too picked up the pace, chiefly by increasing the number of his television appearances. . . . Skeffington, before all else, favored the direct and personal contact with the voter; this approach had left McCluskey cold. He wanted television, and—more significant—so did his principal supporters."*—"The Last Hurrah."

Because he ignored the power of television in politics, Frank Skeffington, mayor of Boston in Edwin O'Connor's 1956 novel, went down in defeat.

This fictional account had its basis in fact. Ever since Dwight Eisenhower used television to overwhelm the 1952 Republican Convention, nullifying the political party power held by his rival for the nomination, Robert Taft, politicians and political scientists alike have observed that the medium brings a new dimension to politics. Instead of operating through the buffer of the party structure, the candidate on TV appeals directly to the voter. As a result, the traditional two-step process of communication, in which voters were largely influenced by local opinion leaders, has been short-circuited.

But the role of television has altered since it first proved so effective. Once merely a tool that could be used with skill, it is now part of an election technology that includes not only communications, but the increasingly precise techniques of polling, the sophisticated conclusions of research on persuasion and influence, and the versatility of computer analysis of voter patterns to pinpoint issues to emphasize and those to stay away from.

**The campaign** is generally packaged and presented by advertising specialists—"The campaigns can best be followed in the media trade press, where political campaigns are treated alongside beer accounts," says Dr. Harold Mendelsohn of the University of Denver. But the entire process has called into being a new group of technocrats that Dr. Dan Nimmo of the University of Missouri at Columbia has termed the management-pollster-communicator complex.

This new group, in effect, has re-

placed the party structure as a buffer between the voter and the candidate. The professionals organize a candidate's campaign, collect data on the electorate, determine the issues and image that the candidate should put forth, and then develop strategies that the candidate should pursue if he is to be elected.

As a result, far from bringing the candidate more directly in contact with the electorate, TV, in combination with the other techniques in the system, has interposed a new buffer that is even less responsive to voter pressure than the political party.

**The first step** in developing a campaign according to the new technology is to profile the electorate. A potent tool in this process is census data, which yields information on social rank, based on educational and occupational levels, ethnic ratings and housing. Another source of information is the growing body of social science research on attitudes and values of voters, stimulated by the growing enthusiasm for computer-based research that is sweeping behavioral science. Correlating the census data with the research on attitudes

allows the campaign director to develop his strategy on issues and communications.

Once the electorate is profiled, the optimum means of communication is chosen to reach the audience. Here several decades of communications research come into play.

Starting back in World War II, for instance, Dr. Carl Hovland and a communications study group at Yale University found that an audience with a relatively low I.Q. responds best to material in which the conclusions of an argument are stated explicitly, rather than implied.

Other studies by the Yale group indicate the importance of the order of presentation in persuasion. When conflicting views are discussed, other factors being equal, the last argument presented is the most effective. This law of primacy is a technique that President Nixon has used, probably instinctively as a good campaigner, in his public presentations. He will state a number of opposing points of view on an issue and then close with his own view: "But now I wish to make my position clear."



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*Kissing the baby: Traditional gestures are tailored to fit the total plan.*

## . . . campaigning

More recent studies have attempted to probe the relative effectiveness of television and other media. Research by Dr. Bruce Westley of the University of Kentucky, for example, indicates that women of low education and income, and with working-class status and a minimal interest in politics are particularly trusting of television. If the electorate profile showed a substantial number of such voters, then heavy TV exposure, employing the techniques developed by Hovland and others, would be an indicated strategy.

The whole process of campaigning, from traditional rallies and street meetings to the packaging of brief spot appearances on TV and radio, are thus judged on the basis of their effectiveness in the whole campaign.

**Computers** are useful not only for electorate profiles but also for a variety



Wally Huntington

*Napolitan: Parties are obsolete.*

of data storage functions. Mayor John Lindsay of New York in the 1968 primary campaign catalogued the reactions of 100,000 registered Republicans to phone calls asking them to rate him and his opponent on a scale of one to five; the printout was later used in the election campaign when Lindsay was running as an independent against both a Republican and a Democrat.

Mailing lists are another tool. Sometimes they are compiled by the campaign organization, but more often they are simply bought from consultants who specialize in direct mail techniques. The lists are used not only to spread campaign literature but to solicit contributions—an increasingly important campaign function.

Funding in the new political technology is critical, and is one of the major points of controversy about modern political campaigning. Computer analysis and campaign packaging are a highly skilled, expensive business, and TV is inordinately expensive and equal-

ly important. Studies at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center show that in 1960 and 1964 television accounted for 60 percent of voters' information about Presidential elections; and Dr. Mendelsohn reports that in 1968, of the more than \$50 million spent on the Presidential election, \$20 million to \$25 million went directly to purchase broadcast time. A new peak was reached this spring as Richard Ottinger spent \$830,000 on a New York Senate primary campaign for television advertising. His total expenditure of \$1.92 million was about nine times what three rivals spent.

The implications of extensive communications technology in politics are still being assessed. But some of the developments are clear.

"This means the movement into politics of high-powered media and public relations personnel," says Dr. Mendelsohn. "Because candidates can utilize their services they are displacing the political party; candidates can bypass the party with a management team and money. And of course private money in political coffers is not entirely altruistic."

Joseph Napolitan, president of a successful political consultant firm, agrees with Dr. Mendelsohn's assessment of the effect of the new technology on the political party. But he does not think the effect is bad.

"Political parties are obsolete," he says. "Technology has surpassed political parties as they function in their present status. Now instant electronic communication is the chief vehicle of comment between the voter and the candidate."

Napolitan feels that the more business-like approach of management teams eliminates the waste of traditional political organizations. "In the past, campaigns were sloppy, poorly managed and often not staffed with professionals," says Napolitan. But more important, he feels that the new technology and use of professional management allows men who were successful in other fields to enter politics.

"Some of the best men in the Senate came in from business and the academy. Otherwise people would be deprived of their leadership," he contends.

"This development is probably more dangerous than not," says Dr. Mendelsohn. "Traditionally the party develops candidates and acts as a buffer between the public and the office. It disrupts party discipline and means that a candidate with money can be elected without being responsible to anybody, including the electorate."

"Personally I don't feel comfortable that a man could be elected without a record of public service," says Dr. An-

gus Campbell of the University of Michigan, an analyst of American voting behavior for the past 20 years. "It has a disruptive effect on the party and means service to the party has nothing to do with ability to get elected."

Dr. Nimmo points out in his book, "The Political Persuaders," that the increased cost of campaigning brought about by expensive communications usage will eliminate a number of candidates. He also suggests that in a period of increasing disillusionment with the political process, candidates who might appeal to disenchanted voters may be hindered from entering the arena of expensive campaigning.

But Dr. Nimmo believes that the majority of middle-class Americans are not particularly disturbed by this development. "The large number of small donations in recent campaigns," he says,



*Mendelsohn: Private money a problem.*

"suggests that many citizens intuitively see campaign costs as a way of keeping the riffraff out of American elections; perhaps the financial contributors, large and small, prefer unregulated spending so long as it assures their interests a minimal control over elections."

As is happening in so many other fields, political behavior is being altered by technology and the technocrats who are adept in its uses. Dr. Nimmo maintains that the new technology is surpassing the importance of the political party that was the base of the old politics. But it is also in conflict with a growing movement calling for a new politics based on principle rather than party loyalty.

"Elections are approached neither as conflicts between parties nor as confrontations of principle," he states. "They are viewed instead as contests of personalities and, even more basically, they offer a choice between the sophisticated engineers working on behalf of those personalities." □