
BACKGROUND BOOKS

CHOOSING AMERICA'S PRESIDENTS

At the turn of the century, Chicago newspaperman Finley Peter Dunne created "Mister Dooley," a fictional Irish bartender who voiced the common man's views. "Politics ain't beanbag," Dooley once said. "Tis a man's game; an' women, childher, an' pro-hyhibitionists'd do well to keep out iv it."

If Mr. Dooley were tending bar today, writes Martin Schram in **The Great American Video Game** (Morrow, 1987), he might say that "Politics is video games. 'Tis an actor's game—an imagemark'r's an' illusionist's game—an' women, childher, an' politicians'd do well to keep out iv it."

Television had become so important to politics that by 1984, Schram, a *Washington Post* reporter, decided to cover the election campaign by watching news reports and the candidates' ads on TV. Among other things, Schram concluded that the local television news was more influential than the national network programs in presidential primary campaigns.

During the weeks prior to the crucial New Hampshire primary, some 432,000 adults living in the Boston TV market (which encompasses southern New Hampshire) watched one of the local hour-long news shows; only 312,000 stayed tuned to the half-hour NBC news program that followed. And whereas the network news stories on the candidates usually lasted between 80 seconds and two minutes, the local TV reports often ran twice that long.

Schram's chronicle is the latest of the books on TV and presidential campaigns. Television first provided (relatively) comprehensive campaign coverage during the election of 1952. As Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang report in **Politics and Television** (Quadrangle, 1968), some commentators thought that TV coverage of the 1952 Democratic and

Republican national conventions would transform the conventions into large, New England-style town meetings, enabling viewers, as one news executive put it, "to vote for men and principles, and not for party labels."

In **Television and Presidential Politics** (Christopher, 1972), Robert E. Gilbert recalls some of TV's most significant early moments. During the 1960 campaign, between 65 and 70 million Americans watched each of the four debates between Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Television, it seemed, changed not only what Americans did in their living rooms, but how they practiced politics in their communities. Gilbert quotes author James Michener, then chairman of the Bucks County (Pa.) Democratic Party: "Immediately after the debate we received funds from heaven knows where to open four additional offices . . . We got phone calls volunteering services. We got automobiles and posters. We received checks through the mail and a steady stream of visitors."

As television changed the business of politics, politics changed the business of television. In **The People Machine** (Harper, 1968), journalist Robert McNeil says that by 1964, TV executives discovered that the network that attracted the most viewers during the party conventions usually gained the Number One audience ratings over the next four years. One unnamed CBS reporter admitted that "CBS went to the [1964 Republican] San Francisco convention with the desire to beat NBC, not to cover the convention in [the] most thoughtful and original way."

Before long, some politicians began to criticize the media's role. Conservatives suspected that television and newspaper reporters were not fair-minded but biased in favor of liberal causes and candi-

dates. After being elected, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew charged that media stars were "nattering nabobs of negativism" who were out of touch with America's "silent majority." But C. Richard Hofstetter's **Bias In the News** (Ohio State Univ., 1976), a sober study of the 1972 campaign, found that ABC, CBS, and NBC did not slant their coverage to favor the Democratic nominee, George McGovern, over the G.O.P. incumbent, Richard Nixon.

But journalism is "horse racist," according to Michael J. Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan, authors of **Over the Wire and On TV** (Russell Sage, 1983). Robinson and Sheehan arrived at this and other conclusions after examining more than 5,000 news stories on the 1980 presidential campaign, which had been produced by CBS and United Press International. Fully two-thirds of the stories, they say, focused not on substantive issues but on the "horse race"—that is, which candidates were ahead and which were behind. "Networks and wires," the authors observe, "won't make anybody an expert on anything except how a politician is doing in the polls."

While some scholars have pondered "bias," others have wondered whether TV really informs viewers at all. Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure complained in **The Unseeing Eye** (Putnam's, 1976) that TV news reports of the 1972 campaign "almost entirely avoid[ed] discussion of the candidates' qualifications."

In **The Main Source** (Sage, 1986), John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy argue that television is simply a poor medium for conveying *information*. The typical TV news program, the authors point out, crams 20 rapid-fire stories into 22 minutes of commercial-interrupted air time. Television watchers sometimes cannot even tell when one news report ends and the next begins. Nor can they

go back and review news they missed or did not understand.

"For many viewers, watching the news may produce an experience of having been informed," say Robinson and Levy, "But it is a false sense of knowledge, for it is based only on a vaguely understood jumble of visual and auditory stimuli that leave few traces in long-term memory."

Whatever its effect on the voters, television has clearly transformed the way the candidates approach presidential campaigns. **Nominating A President** (Praeger, 1980), edited by John Foley, Dennis A. Britton, and Eugene B. Everett, Jr., presents a series of frank round table talks held at Harvard during the 1980 campaign. One speaker, consultant John P. Marttila, claims that most candidates now spend between 65 and 70 percent of their money on TV, radio, and newspaper advertising. "The real foundations of modern campaigning," he says, "are survey research and television." He adds that "most candidates around the country circumvent the local party organization."

Hence, the blossoming of television, combined with the proliferation of state primaries, Nelson Polsby observes in **The Consequences of Party Reform** (Oxford, 1983), has given rise to a new group of political operatives, including "fund-raisers by mail and by rock concert, media buyers, advertising experts, public relations specialists, poll analysts, television spot producers . . ."

Newspapers still set the agenda in presidential campaigns despite television's hold on the candidates.

In **Elections American Style** (Brookings, 1987), edited by A. James Reichley, Albert R. Hunt of the *Wall Street Journal* points out that in 1984 newspapermen initiated the major stories, such as Walter Mondale's links to special interest groups, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson's ties to black extremists: "Once the agenda was on the table, tele-

vision dominated the dialogue.”

And a skilled magazine reporter, Hunt might have added, also introduced the “human interest” approach (which so many TV folk employ today) to covering campaigns. When Theodore White sat down to write **The Making of the President, 1960** (Atheneum, 1961), he hoped that there might be “some permanent value in the effort of a contemporary reporter to catch the mood and the strains, the weariness, elation and uncertainties of the men who sought to lead America.” White’s formula proved so popular that he produced *Making of the President* sequels on the 1964, 1968, and 1972 elections.

Equally important, White’s book served as a model for other narratives. In **The Boys On the Bus** (Random, 1972), which covers the 1972 campaign, Timothy Crouse describes the pack of reporters who “fed off the same pool report, the same daily [press] handout.” After a while, Crouse says, the reporters “began to believe the same rumors, subscribe to the same theories, and write the same stories.”

Among those wayfarers whom Crouse encounters is Theodore White, who had soured on up-close journalism. White tells Crouse: “We’re all sitting there watching [Democratic nominee George McGovern] work on his acceptance speech, poor bastard . . . and all of us are observing him, taking notes like mad, getting all the little details. Which I think I invented as a method of reporting and which I now sincerely regret. If you write about this, say that I sincerely regret it.”

Other journalists’ after-action reports

include Martin Schram’s **Running for President, 1976** (Stein & Day, 1977); Jeff Greenfield’s **The Real Campaign** (Summit, 1982), about the 1980 race; and two books on the 1984 Mondale-Reagan contest, **Wake Us When It’s Over** (Macmillan, 1985) by Jack Germond and Jules Witcover; and William A. Henry III’s bright **Visions of America** (Atlantic Monthly, 1985). All of these post-mortems examine the media’s role. Germond and Witcover suggest that had Reagan, the “Great Communicator,” not been able to manipulate the media, the better-informed Mondale could have won on the issues—a claim which, many of the book’s critics have argued, is probably excessive.

Outstanding scholarly long-term accounts include Eugene H. Roseboom’s concise **History of Presidential Elections** (Macmillan, 1957); a four-volume **History of American Presidential Elections** (McGraw-Hill, 1971), edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; and **Congressional Quarterly’s** detailed **Guide to U.S. Elections**.

Happily, there is also one respectable work—Paul F. Boller, Jr.’s anecdotal **Presidential Campaigns** (Oxford, 1984)—which takes a light-hearted approach. During the 1972 campaign, Democratic vice presidential nominee Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy in-law, liked to tell audiences how he tried to get his children to study harder, noting, “When Abraham Lincoln was your age, he walked twelve miles back and forth to school every day.” “That’s nothing,” Shriver reported one of his children as saying, “When Uncle Jack was your age, he was President of the United States.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Lawrence Lichty, a former Wilson Center Fellow and now professor of radio/television/film at Northwestern University, suggested many of the titles that appear in this essay.*