

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Politics Out of Focus

"The Focus-Group Fraud" by Andrew Ferguson, in *The Weekly Standard* (Oct. 14, 1996), 1150 17th St. N.W., Ste. 505, Washington, D.C. 20036-4617.

Take 10 or so people with some important characteristic in common—all Democrats who vote Republican, say, or all middle-aged working women who dislike House Speaker Newt Gingrich—promise them \$50 apiece, put them in a room together with a moderator for up to two hours, and what do you have, besides a possible headache?

A "focus group."

"They're the hottest research mechanism going right now," one political consultant told Ferguson, a senior editor at the *Weekly Standard*. Once used only in the world of retail marketing, focus groups have become ubiquitous in American politics. It was a focus group, for instance, that led Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole to suggest that parents would choose him rather than Bill Clinton as a foster father if their children were orphaned. This was a gaffe. A *Washington Post* poll soon showed that 52 percent of Americans would pick Clinton to rear their children.

Whereas polls are conducted among a large group of randomly selected people, who are in theory representative of the public as a whole, Ferguson notes, focus groups are not randomly selected and have too few participants to be representative of anything. Yet focus groups have two advantages over polls: they are cheaper (\$5,000–6,000, as opposed to at least \$12,000 for a poll), and they have a personal element. After the focus groupies have spoken, the candidate receives from the political consultant "easy-to-read reports" with a lot of

poll-like data, "peppered with illustrative quotes and anecdotes from real human beings." For similar reasons, some political reporters like to use focus groups, too.

The sad reality, Ferguson adds, is that all this "in-depth" research merely reveals the visceral responses of people who don't spend much time thinking about politics. Or, as critics of focus groups often observe, Ferguson writes, "It is difficult to grasp what people are thinking when they aren't."

Because focus group results tend to be addictive as well as misleading, they are harmful to political life. "If a candidate flits from issue to issue . . . he is probably taking his cues from focus groups," Ferguson writes. A slavish search for good ratings from "instant response" groups—in which people give moment-by-moment responses to speeches by manipulating dials wired to a computer—deforms political rhetoric and leads politicians to use buzzwords to curry favor with constituents rather than lead them.

Ironically, Ferguson observes, focus groups "have come to full flower just at the moment when conventional wisdom tells us that the system resists as never before the hopes and needs and desires of the average voter. And the average voter heartily concurs. In making the complaint, he ignores the groveling figure of every politician and political operative in the country hunched around his feet, their eager and upturned faces smeared with the polish from his boots."

The Bright Side of Negative Campaigning

"In Defense of Negative Campaigning" by William G. Mayer, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Fall 1996), Academy of Political Science, 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115-1274.

One thing about recent American political contests on which all high-minded academics, journalists, and other right-thinking sorts seem to agree is that there has been far too much mudslinging. Candidates should somehow be made to clean up their campaigns. Perhaps, some critics have gone so far as to suggest, the United States should take a cue from Venezuela and bar politicians from even mentioning their opponents in political

advertisements. Not so fast, says Mayer, a political scientist at Northeastern University. "Negative campaigning certainly sounds bad; it's so, well, you know, negative." But it really isn't. In fact, he argues, it is "a necessary and legitimate part of any election."

No serious discussion of what a candidate (especially one who is not an incumbent) intends to do in office can be conducted without talking about "the flaws and short-