

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-

comings of current policies,” Mayer points out. “If a candidate is arguing for a major change in government policy, his first responsibility is to show that current policies are in some way deficient.”

The information and analysis provided in “negative” speeches or ads can also be valuable in themselves, he contends. The electorate needs to know about “the abilities and virtues [candidates] don’t have; the mistakes they have made; the problems they haven’t dealt with; the issues they would prefer not to talk about; the bad or unrealistic policies they have proposed.” Only their opponents will air those issues.

And the candidate’s character and behavior “are entirely relevant issues, more important than many policy questions,” Mayer argues. People may disagree about which particular character traits are most significant, but especially in elections for executive offices such as president, governor, or mayor, “where character flaws can have such important repercussions, I think we are well advised to cast the net widely. Certainly there is no reason to preclude a priori any discussion of a candidate’s sexual behavior or intellectual honesty.”



Finally, the threat of negative campaigning, Mayer points out, acts as a beneficial restraint on candidates. If they “always knew that their opponents would never say anything critical about them, campaigns would quickly turn into a procession of lies, exaggerations, and unrealistic promises.”

Not *all* mudslinging is good, Mayer admits. The bad sort, he says, is bad because it’s misleading (taking votes or actions out of context, for example), or deals with matters of dubious relevance, or is uncivil in tone. But being negative is not bad in itself.

The Communitarian Fallacy

“Communitarian Dreams” by Roger Scruton, in *City Journal* (Autumn 1996), Manhattan Institute, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017; “Belonging in the Past” by Michael Ignatieff, in *Prospect* (Nov. 1996), 4 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3RA.

Communitarianism is the latest star in the political-intellectual firmament, attracting the rapt attention of the White House and the mainstream national media. The communitarians are unconservative critics of liberalism who denounce the ethos of rights without responsibilities and commend the virtues of community as a corrective to unrestrained individualism. That is all well and good, argues Scruton, editor of Britain’s *Salisbury Review*, but when push comes to shove, communitarian thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, and Michael Sandel show themselves to be, beneath their sentimental “rhetoric of fellow feeling,” liberals in disguise.

In *Sources of the Self* (1989), for instance, Taylor attacks the contemporary cult of self, but then urges a community with “a decidedly liberal aspect,” Scruton writes. “He defends ‘multiculturalism’ against the tyran-

ny of majority values, the welfare state against the ‘selfishness’ of unbridled capitalism, and ‘participatory democracy’ against the shadowy machinations of institutional power.” Similarly, Walzer and Sandel make the welfare state “the very symbol of ‘community.’” Missing from that equation, Scruton claims, is “any appreciation of the real communities that give meaning to our lives, the associations and attachments that go today by the name of civil society.”

In *The Spirit of Community* (1991), Amitai Etzioni, chief movement publicist, contends that the liberal emphasis on rights “encourages people to ask but not to give,” Scruton notes, and that America must “wake up to the duties of citizenship, if it is not to degenerate into an anarchic crowd of welfare dependents, tax dodgers, and disloyal egoists.” Though conservatives would agree, Scruton writes,