



1984

## Orwell's 1984 and the Lonely World of Campaign Management

George W. Geib  
Butler University, [ggeib@butler.edu](mailto:ggeib@butler.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Political History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Geib, George W., "Orwell's 1984 and the Lonely World of Campaign Management" *Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences Proceedings* / (1984): 94-98.

Available at [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/796](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/796)

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## Orwell's 1984 and the Lonely World of Campaign Management

GEORGE W. GEIB  
Butler University

One of the great dreams of western democracy is a vision of an informed electorate, able to base its decisions upon a reasoned evaluation of candidates and their issues. One of our great nightmares is the inversion of that vision, complete with an uninformed populace making non-rational (or even irrational) choices. And one of the great expressions of that nightmarish vision is Orwell's *1984*.

Its author was an unusual social critic. From the moment his novel appeared 35 years ago, it attracted a devoted following among the political Right, who cheered what they saw as a thinly veiled denunciation of Stalinism and the Left. In practice, however, Orwell was a supporter of the British Labor Party, and his sympathies lay somewhere within the broad confines of social democracy. Early marketers of his volume often treated it as a romance, stressing the sexuality he wove into his plot. Yet Orwell intended to title his work *The Last Man in Europe* as a reminder of the humanistic thrust he wished to project. Interpreters ever since have faced similar struggles trying to categorize both the man and his ideas.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that Orwell chose a title that appeared to proclaim him a futurist, while much of the novel appears to be poor prophecy. The scarcity and enforced rationing that he had experienced in the 1940s yielded to the mass marketed prosperity of the 1950s and '60s, and the direct conflict of superpowers that he had known gave way to smaller surrogate wars. The mind-numbing bureaucracy and foul cafeteria food he portrayed may be found in most high schools, but are much less apparent to a modern "high tech/high touch" society. The modern west, in short, failed to adopt the most flagrant manifestations of his dystopian vision.

Still, Orwell has survived well. His book is found on every list of significant modern political novels, and its paperback edition soared back up the best-seller charts as the actual year of 1984 arrived. Something about his portrayal of a totalitarian bureaucracy remains strangely plausible and compelling. Something still causes us to ask if it could happen here. Something that he saw in the

politics of 1948 is still able to engage our attention. It's worth asking what that was.

The year 1948 saw many interesting political events, including the presidential contest that pitted Harry Truman against Tom Dewey. Roosevelt was dead, and the GOP was already showing signs of the strength that would allow them to win five of the first nine post-war elections for president and to closely contest three others. It was also one of the first elections to be closely monitored by the new profession of public opinion research. Scientific surveys were little more than a decade old. But some of the more visible pollsters were already gaining headlines with studies that the press frequently, albeit mistakenly, called predictions. The most notable, of course, was the six percent October lead that Gallup called for Dewey. Some interpreted the ensuing Truman victory as proof that the "pollsters are wrong", but the pollsters more accurately interpreted that election as proof they needed to refine and tighten their procedures — and shun any claims to prophecy.

The consequences of those decisions are well known to us today. Any professional market opinion firm can now guarantee that with a proper sampling technique they can measure voter opinion at a given time with a margin of error of no more than plus or minus 3% in 19 tries out of 20. It isn't always cheap: a good survey can cost upwards of \$10,000. And any buyer of a survey is well advised to have the firm's best mind analyze the data before using it. Yet; with cautions of that type, a new world of insights has opened to us in the last three decades.<sup>1</sup>

Much of what we have learned has served simply to confirm the pluralism of American society. We know that differences of attitude by region, income, education, race, sex, and religion are all realities of our time — although not always by the margins we'd expect. We know that these differences all show correlations with voter choice, and even with the decision whether to vote at all. At the same time we've seen many of the stereotypes of political analysis crumble. We know, for example, that the modern mass rally is as often the result of improved mobilization of existing constituencies as it is the result of new issues or enlarged public concern. And we've become suspicious of the idea of electoral mandates since noting that many voters do not share the views of their candidates on a variety of specific issues.<sup>2</sup>

More significant for our discussion, we've learned two key features of the electorate that are deeply disturbing to anyone raised in traditional democratic rhetoric. Simply put, the electorate isn't always consistent, and the electorate isn't always well informed. The consistency theme became particularly apparent in the 1960s when a series of studies showed voters straddling key issues of principle and policy. Free and Cantril,<sup>3</sup> for example, found majorities of Americans "conservative" on most matters of principle, "liberal" on most matters of policy, and little concerned about any inconsistency. The knowledge theme appeared regularly as pollsters asked questions of specific information, and then

reported the percentages of people who appeared to lack the most elementary factual data. Name recognition tests showed incumbent U. S. Senators unknown to half their adult constituents, and one test showed half of graduating high school seniors unable to give the correct number of U. S. Senators from their state.

Such findings, of course, are typical of the information that has come to the attention of political managers, and come at a time when it's possible to convert survey information into vote production. There has been a quiet revolution in campaign mechanics in the last quarter century that has allowed a new generation of technocrats to supplement, or even supplant, the old party organizations. Many of these new managers are specialists within a speciality, dealing with direct mail, telephone banks, paid media, or fund raising. All have become skilled in converting numbers into votes.<sup>4</sup>

The folklore of the field pays homage to a handful of campaigns that have become a paradigm for subsequent races. Republicans, for example, like to harken back to Nelson Rockefeller's 1966 re-election bid for governor in New York. Rocky entered the race a clear underdog, widely disliked even within his party. But careful polling identified first pollution and then education as "soft" issues he could capitalize upon — and a series of skillful television ads, including a simulated interview with a fish, exploited those issues to set him on the road to a narrow victory.

Democrats are fond of citing campaigns by Matt Reese as one of their models. Reese's approach is to use massive telephone banks, staffed by minimum wage employees, to contact voters among those groups and in those areas that surveys suggest could become favorable to his causes. Reese's successes, particularly in defeating "right to work" referenda, is a reminder that the new technology can serve issues and interests as well as individual candidates.

The role of the new technocrats is most apparent in presidential elections. Since Theodore White's best seller, *The Making of the President, 1960*,<sup>5</sup> showed how campaigns develop a life of their own, we've experienced an increasing flood of insider's and observer's accounts that convey the contemporary logic of politics. We know, for example, that Ronald Reagan's decision to oppose the Panama Canal treaty in GOP primaries in 1979 was made after a focus group pinpointed the issue for him; that most national television advertising in 1980 was concentrated upon local stations in key electoral vote states; or that Jesse Jackson found intensive advertising over radio stations that offer rhythm and soul programming to be the best tool for turning out voters from a segmented media market. The Ferraro nomination followed hard upon the pollster's discovery of the "gender gap".

The same trend recurs at the state and local level where growing numbers of campaign managers are emulating the national trend setters. Jesse Helms became the "six million dollar man" through targeted direct mailings in his 1978 campaign, even if he had to use over 80% of that sum to cover direct

mail costs. George Duekemjian tipped the scales in California by a carefully timed mailing of over a million absentee ballot applications in 1982. The Republican party boasts of its "two percent solution" which helped them to preserve control of the Senate in 1982 by concentrating resources in states where a two percent voter shift could win or lose a race. A visitor to the American Association of Political Consultants annual conference can add to the list almost indefinitely.<sup>6</sup> Even George Orwell has been taken into account as campaign marketers carefully stress "84" without the mention of "19" in their advertising.

Such craft, of course, has its limits. Any candidate who expects a fast ride to victory on the shoulders of his staff would be well advised to recall some sobering cautions. The new style is expensive: the Federal Election Commission reported an average of \$345,000 spent by winning members of the U. S. House of Representatives in 1980. The new style is demanding: it requires you, for example, to remember that the attention span of the average voter is measured in seconds, not minutes. The new style is unforgiving: it encourages targeted attacks, particularly upon radio. In short, the new style is neutral: it is as available to your opponent as it is to you. It promises no end to spirited election contests. But it does suggest the demise of many older campaign approaches.

The great losers in this transformation have almost certainly been the traditional political parties of America. It may still be useful to run with a party for the "invisible" offices at the lower end of the ticket. But once one crosses the line to become visible to the voter, the label of party quickly fades to be replaced by an intensely political appeal conducted at the personal level. The old precinct and ward leaders yield to a small cadre of professional specialists whose loyalty lies with the candidate.

It probably would do a disservice to the older party leaders to suggest that they were any less interested in winning, and it would be as much a disservice to the new technocrats to suggest they are more cynical or opportunistic. But in important ways the change is still dramatic. The election worker is becoming invisible. Mail, telephone, and paid media may well provide an individual more contact with a campaign than ever before, but interpersonal contact has grown progressively less. We will see much of the 1984 election, but few voters will ever see even one worker in the flesh before they reach the polls.

It's an impersonality many sense, but one that few have been able to articulate. And among those few stands George Orwell. To reread *1984* is to grasp a world of political loneliness, where even a loyal party member feels divorced from the seat of power and unable to participate in meaningful decision-making. Whatever else it may be, Orwell's nightmare is the nightmare of the grass-roots politician, who sees his vision of personal interaction between individuals and government passing from the scene. And there lies much of Orwell's relevance and his continuing humanistic appeal.

## NOTES

1. The new directions of campaigns are nicely summarized in Robert Agranoff, *The Management of Election Campaigns* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1976).
2. Most widely quoted is Norman Nie, et al., *The Changing American Voter*, enlarged edition, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
3. Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).
4. The journal, *Campaigns and Elections*, offers the most varied coverage of these developments, with heavy stress upon fund raising considerations.  
(New York: Pocket Books, 1961).
5. The journal, *Public Opinion*, is particularly good at covering these developments and in relating them to survey data reports.