



From the SelectedWorks of Richard M. Skinner

June 2008

Review of "Evaluating Campaign Quality"

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/richard_skinner/9

Book Review of “Evaluating Campaign Quality”

Richard Skinner, Allegheny College

In *Evaluating Campaign Quality: Can The Electoral Process Be Improved?*, L. Sandy Maisel, Darrell West and Brett Clifton show a keen understanding of the fundamental motive underlying candidates and consultants: to win. They also understand the lack of interest that most citizens have in politics. They exhibit a refreshing skepticism about the more high-flown aspirations of reformers, without entirely giving up on the possibility of elevating campaign discourse.

The authors investigate a variety of measures intended to elevate the level of political discourse. Reforms that voters can observe and understand, such as debates and issue forums, seem to have the best record of improving discourse. Maisel, West and Clifton generally express skepticism about more complex, less visible initiatives, such as codes of campaign conduct and pledges to refrain from negativity, and their data mostly support these views. Outside actors can engage in attacks eschewed by the campaigns; candidates can accuse their opponents of breaking their pledge. Straightforward reforms are less vulnerable to being manipulated by campaigns.

Evaluating Campaign Quality is based upon an admirably wide-ranging mixture of data collection methods, including a national opinion survey and a content analysis of 22 competitive House and Senate races. Maisel, West and Clifton devote special attention to political consultants, exploring their views through a survey, focus groups and elite interviews. Their efforts were guided by an advisory board and a peer review panel that included many of the leading figures in political consulting and applied political science, respectfully. The authors should also be praised for including extensive methodological appendices.

Extensive research into political consulting (which includes a survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups) leads the authors to question whether the field qualifies as a profession at all. Few consultants thought that self-regulation, whether by the American Association of Political Consultants, had much prospect of restraining campaign conduct. Nor did they see licensing or certification as viable options. Political consulting lacks many of the attributes of a profession. While it does include particular skills such as survey research, political consulting does not require abstruse knowledge or highly technical expertise. Certificate programs may be growing, but there is no degree or examination that opens the door to political professionalism as one would find for medicine or law. Anyone can claim to be a campaign consultant and the main credential is winning. Consultants were almost relentlessly pessimistic about reforming campaign conduct: they want to make money, candidates run to win, and little will stand in their way.

Maisel, West and Clifton do not include journalists in their studies, which puzzles the reader, since the authors repeatedly decry campaign coverage, especially on the local level, as being superficial and horse-race-obsessed. They suspect that reporters are overextended and underqualified, but it would have been helpful to hear from journalists explaining how they decide how to cover elections. While they have recommendations

about educating journalists about improving campaign coverage, the authors are not able to tell us what actual newspeople – constrained by time and money – would think of these solutions.

Political practitioners will find *Evaluating Campaign Quality* to be an enjoyable, helpful and realistic look at their world. Reform advocates may find its levelheadedness bracing but should appreciate the authors' support for some of their proposals. Journalists will find some valuable suggestions for improving their work. Academics who focus on campaigns and elections, mass media, and political parties will also appreciate this work. Those of a more theoretical cast may find *Evaluating Campaign Quality* lacking in broader ambitions, but not in fundamental rigor.

Campaign reformers often ascribe the low level of political trust in the United States to the impact of unethical campaigning, particular negative television advertisements designed by consultants. But Americans have been distrustful since at least the late 1960s, while the era of civic optimism lasted for little more than the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations. While we do not have data about how Americans viewed their politicians before the rise of political behaviorialism in the 1950s, the works of Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken could tell us that cynicism may be more the norm than the exception in American history. One must also ask what constitutes a “good” campaign? One that provides an elevated level of discourse? One where voters understand the differences between the candidates? One brings the largest number of voters to the polls? (What does that say about the Gilded Age period of sleaze and sky-high turnout?) Or one produces a favorable result? And who decides? Candidates? Journalists? The electorate?

Ultimately, Maisel, West and Clifton suggest that while some campaign reforms are worthwhile, the solutions to the debasement of political discourse lie beyond what can be provided by good-conduct pledges. Nonpartisan groups should monitor a few highly visible elections and publicize poor practices so that candidates and consultants come to see fairness and substance as being in their own interest. (Indeed, consultants do remark that “ad watches” can make them more careful about making unsubstantiated claims). But reformers ultimately need to convince voters to demand “more information, civil campaigns, and substantive debate.” As part of this admittedly difficult task, the authors suggest electoral reforms that would increase participation, making the electorate more representative and less vulnerable to last-minute negative attacks: early voting, automatic registration, making Election Day a holiday, even compulsory voting. Perhaps the solutions to low voter turnout may not lie in improving campaign quality, but in broader, more systemic changes. Or are we simply confronting the age-old conflict between civic virtue and private interest, between the demands of participatory democracy, the drives of ambitious politicians, and the desires of an apolitical populace? Do we get the campaigns we deserve?