



Democracy **FOR HIRE**

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN
POLITICAL CONSULTING

Dennis W. Johnson

Democracy for Hire

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For Pat, with all my love

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My introduction to political consulting three and a half decades ago was abrupt and dismissive. “I don’t need no goddamned professor on this campaign,” scoffed the frazzled campaign manager. “Trouble is, they can’t get off the can, can’t make a decision. To them everything is gray; I want black and white. I want to nail our opponent, I want to rip his head off. I want answers, and I want them now!”

For fifty years, one of the US Senate seats from Virginia had been held by the Byrd family, first by Harry F. Byrd, and then his son, Harry F. Byrd Jr. In 1982, “Little Harry” announced his retirement. Here was a great opportunity for both Republicans and Democrats to capture an open seat. I took a leave of absence from my university political science department to work for the Democratic candidate, Owen B. Pickett, a quiet, self-effacing lawyer and member of the Virginia House of Delegates. His Senate candidacy didn’t last long: Pickett was tripped up over intraparty bickering and was forced to quit the race. His replacement was the popular lieutenant governor, Dick Davis, who somewhat reluctantly accepted the party’s plea to run.

Taking over the fractured campaign was a battle-scarred political operative from Louisiana, James Carville, who was now running his first statewide race. Carville didn’t want me to be the issues and research director, goddamned professor that I was, but veteran staffers working for Davis prevailed upon him. Carville, thirty-seven years old, was jumpy, intense, but fiercely focused. He impressed me in two significant ways. First, while he had never worked in a Virginia election campaign before, within a week, forever working the telephones calling political operatives and party influentials, he gained a far better understanding of the peculiarities of Virginia politics and the strengths and weaknesses of our candidate than I would ever have. Second, he made it clear that we were locked in mortal combat with our opponent. Yes, we would do everything possible to rip the head off our Republican opponent, Congressman Paul S. Trible Jr. For Carville this was not an academic study, we were not engaging in a civics lesson: it was political life or death.

One day, Carville and I had a meeting with our Washington-based pollster, and to make our appointment we had just ninety minutes to drive from Richmond to DuPont Circle in Washington, DC. Normally, the trip takes two hours. We jumped in the campaign car, but first Carville stopped for “lunch” at McDonald’s. We went directly to the drive-thru lane, and when the order came out the pickup window, Carville threw away the hamburger bun, folded the meat in half, and ate it in three bites. He then wolfed down the French fries and gulped

the twenty-ounce Coca Cola—all this before we returned to the street. We made it to our Washington meeting with time to spare.

Our pollster, Peter D. Hart, was one of the established stars of the Democratic consulting world. Hart, thirty-nine, started his polling business in 1971, and had worked for scores of Democratic statewide hopefuls and presidential candidates by the time the Davis for US Senate campaign hired his firm. Calm, cerebral, and gracious, Hart sat down with us to go over the results of the first survey, the benchmark analysis, that he conducted of Virginia voters measuring their attitudes and preferences. I learned quickly why he was one of the best in the business. Hart's analysis was clear and compelling: he summarized the survey data, offering about twenty insightful recommendations on what issues to emphasize, the mood of the voters, where our candidate was known and where he was not, and how voters felt about the candidates.

Dick Davis was a late entry to the race, was outspent two-to-one, and had to contend with a fractured Democratic party; he lost by 2.4 percent. James Carville went on to other races, winning some important gubernatorial and Senate contests, and gaining national and worldwide fame by managing the Clinton for President campaign in 1992. He then focused on international campaigns, speaking engagements, and television and cameo movie appearances, taking on the role of a political celebrity.

Peter Hart spent two more election cycles polling for candidates, then in 1986 turned over the election and candidate side of the business to his partner Geoff Garin, who was later joined by Fred Yang. Hart then concentrated on public polling, teaming up with Republican pollster Robert Teeter in 1989 to create the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll. The Garin-Hart-Yang Research Group remains today one of the most important private polling firms for Democratic and progressive causes.

In 1982, the political consulting business was still relatively new. It began in the 1930s in California, but came into its own in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the early years, many candidates, from president on down, were ambivalent about using outside professional help. But today, consulting is a booming business. During the last presidential-state/local election cycle, candidates, parties, and outside interest groups spent \$6 billion to convince voters, and there appears to be no end in sight for the expenditures in future races, especially with super PAC money flooding in. The money buys professional help. Nearly every major race—for president, governor, US Senate and Congress, big city mayor, and nearly every ballot issue—finds a battery of professional political consultants: general consultants, campaign managers, media firms, pollsters, candidate and opposition researchers, time buyers, direct mail and telephone specialists, online communication specialists, microtargeting specialists, and more.

This book is a history of the growing and evolving field of political consulting. Its title is inspired by journalist William Greider's trenchant observations about American business and democracy written nearly a quarter of century ago.¹ Many individuals assisted me in the writing of this work, particularly those scholars and journalists who understand and appreciate the importance

of political consultants in the electoral arena and political consultants who have written their memoirs, oral histories, and have sat for interviews with me and others. I am most appreciative of the scholars, consultants, and other keen observers of American politics who have discussed and debated with me the role of professionals in campaigns.

A number of colleagues and friends have read the full manuscript or individual chapters. Thanks in particular to my colleagues and friends at the Graduate School of Political Management of George Washington University: Christopher Arterton, Steven Billet, Lara Brown, Michael Cornfield, Matthew Dallek, Edward Grefe, Roberto Izurieta, Mark Kennedy, Gary Nordlinger, and David Rehr. I am also indebted to a number of campaign and election scholars, especially Michael Burton and Bruce Newman. Political consultants who have toiled in the real world of politics have also given me valuable advice and counsel: Whit Ayres, Doug Bailey, David Beatty, Joel Benenson, Bob Blaemire, Walter Clinton, Walter De Vries, Tom Edmonds, Dale Emmons, Brian Franklin, Jim Innocenzi, Mark Mellman, Phil Noble, Rick Ridder, Ray Strother, Lance Tarrance, and Joe Slade White. Further thanks goes to Grace Guggenheim and my friend and wordsmith extraordinaire, Jane E. Jones. Thanks, too, to the staff of the Gelman Library, George Washington University, who graciously and efficiently handled my research requests and gathered materials from far and wide, especially Patricia S. Greenstein, Zachary Elder, Holley Matthews, Fowzia Osman, and Keliy Zechariah.

This book is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Pat. She has read every word of this project, has been my best sounding board and critic, and has helped this project immeasurably with her cheer and encouragement. An entire summer in paradise was spent with me huddled over my keyboard cranking out the final chapters; through it all, she smiled and understood.

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Dennis W. Johnson
Denver, Colorado

Democracy for Hire

Introduction

In a meaningful sense, America is about the holding of elections.

—Anthony King (1997)

THE UNITED STATES is the land of elections; it holds more elections, and holds them more frequently, than any other democracy. Altogether, there are more than 1 million elections held for local, statewide, and national office during a four-year cycle, and there are over 513,000 popularly elected officials in the country. Through their constitutions or laws, states, counties, cities, and other jurisdictions require frequent elections, usually for terms of two or four years. Most elections are low profile, with small budgets, and local impact. But several thousand elections are for much higher stakes, including races for governor, US senator, US representative, other statewide offices such as attorney general, big city mayor, and, in a growing number of cases, statewide ballot issues. Of course, the most consequential and visible contests are presidential elections, held every four years, with pre-primaries, primaries, and the general election—the nation’s unique, cumbersome, and expensive electoral marathon.

The United States is also the land of political consultants. For those few thousand critical and expensive races, from president to city council to ballot initiative, professional consultants are brought in to advise and assist candidates, political parties, and outside interests. This book is a history of political consulting in America, examining how the consulting business developed, highlighting the major figures in the consulting industry, and assessing the impact of professional consulting on elections and American democracy. A key focus is on presidential elections, beginning in 1964, and the crucial role played by consultants and political operatives.

Who are these political consultants? In simplest terms, political consultants are individuals or firms who provide election skills, strategic advice, and services to candidates running for office, to political parties, and to interest groups trying

to influence candidate elections or ballot initiatives.¹ In many cases, consultants started their careers working on campaign staffs, for elected officials, or for a political party. Most early political consultants were motivated by ideology or partisanship; others sought out the thrill of competition and the chance to make a living in the rough and tumble of politics. In recent years, “old school” consultants have been joined by specialists with twenty-first-century technological skills, such as data mining, digital communication, and microtargeting.

Today, political consulting is a flourishing multibillion-dollar business, attracting hundreds of firms and several thousand employees. Sparked by sharp ideological tensions in recent years, with increasing amounts of campaign funds available and the nationalization of what were once local contests, consultants now play a bigger role than ever before in the fabric of campaigns and elections.

Political consultants are sometimes vilified as “hired guns” who will do anything to get their candidates elected; as “image merchants” who, through misleading advertising and distortion, appeal to base emotions of voters; or as the “new kingmakers,” the purveyors of the black arts of campaign trickery and shenanigans. There certainly are enough examples of political consultants who have behaved badly, and throughout this book, from the very first consultants, we will examine such behavior and practices. Yet, for those 5,000–10,000 professional consultants, it is unfair to tar them with such characterizations. Political consultants, unfortunately, suffer from the same kind of reputational smears as personal injury lawyers, “Washington bureaucrats,” Internal Revenue Service employees, nuclear power plant operators, and parking meter readers. They work in an arena that draws controversy and contention. Elections can be brutal: candidates and outside groups often draw sharp distinctions, expose raw edges, and aggressively define their opponents and their policies. In this political warfare, consultants are right in the thick of election strategy and communication.

Why have political consultants? According to Walter De Vries, one of the pioneer consultants featured in this book, “A major reason—if not the only reason—for having campaign consultants is that political parties basically failed to do their job in a changing technological and social environment.”² And consultants have their defenders. Political scientist David A. Dulio, who has carefully examined the impact of political consultants on American campaigns and elections, argues that consultants “are not the bane of the U.S. electoral system. In fact, their appearance and increased presence in elections can benefit democracy.”³

I argue that political consultants are essential to modern campaigning and, for the most part, make a positive contribution to democracy and public discourse. Candidates and causes depend on the skill, judgment, and experience of political consultants. Whether candidates are seeking to be president, governor, senator, big city mayor, or even local school board member, professional consultants are brought in to advise them, develop a winning strategy, and manage their campaigns. In addition, twenty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and many local governments have some form of direct democracy, such as initiatives, referenda, or the recall of elected officials. These ballot initiatives, particularly in California, have become lucrative markets for political

consultants. American-style democracy is emulated in many parts of the world, and American political consultants and their European or Latin American counterparts have become key factors in the electoral success of candidates for high office. Business interests and advocacy organizations have found that the skills and experience of political consultants are valued resources in their attempts to influence public policy. For several decades, political consulting firms have been small enterprises, with a handful of principals and associates, rarely generating over a few million dollars in revenue. Recently, however, several successful political consulting firms have merged into larger public relations organizations, and become integral parts of national, even global, communications operations.

Political consultants bring experience, skills, and discipline to unpredictable and often volatile electoral and communication battlefields. A campaign for elective office is faced with many unknowns, and much can go wrong: the candidate goes “off message,” a friend acting as a surrogate says something stupid, a damaging allegation from thirty years ago resurfaces, the candidate’s teenage son posts something salacious on Instagram, an intraparty feud threatens the candidate’s success, or fundraising falls far short of the campaign’s goals. Meanwhile, the opponent and his team are doing everything they can to raise money, grab attention, sharpen their attack lines, mobilize resources, and convince uninformed and relatively uninterested voters to select him on Election Day. Candidates for major office cannot handle these challenges alone, nor can they simply rely on friends and eager volunteers. All the best intentions, sincere beliefs, and enthusiasm of volunteers can rarely supplant the skill, judgment, and, above all, experience of seasoned campaign veterans, who have seen it all before and have a good understanding of how to cope with the many potential obstacles a campaign might face. The learning curve is too steep and the stakes are too high to learn on the job.

Today, political consulting embraces a wide variety of specialties and niches. Political consulting firms provide quantitative and qualitative research, through a variety of public opinion polls, focus group analysis, and other forms of research. Media firms produce campaign advertising, direct mail firms create messages that try to persuade voters and have them contribute campaign dollars, targeting firms analyze and determine where the campaign should focus its resources, candidate and opposition researchers comb through public records to find weaknesses or lines of attack. Some professionals are campaign managers, while others are devoted to fundraising, telephone persuasion calls, online communication, or television time buying.

A gubernatorial campaign, spending \$10 million, may use a wide range of consultants—campaign manager, pollster, media team, candidate and opposition researchers, telephone and direct mail communication, online specialists, fundraisers, and others. A local campaign, spending \$50,000 may be able to afford just a campaign manager, a few volunteers, one poll, and some direct mail. Below the \$50,000 level, it is very difficult to hire professionals, and such campaigns, almost always for local office, will have to rely on the enthusiasm and shoe leather of committed volunteers.

Elections, of course, have been core elements of American democracy since the beginning of the Republic. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local political parties and political organizations ran campaigns, augmented by volunteers and friends of the candidates. Professional political consulting is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first political consultants, a husband and wife team, began their work in California during the 1930s; other public relations or advertising firms did political work on the side and emerged during the 1940s and 1950s. By the mid-1960s, a new group of young political operatives had created small political consulting firms, often with just two or three professionals, providing expertise and analysis for a variety of candidates from their respective political parties. In many ways, they were replacing the political party services that for many decades had provided candidates with manpower and strategic advice.

In 1981, political scientist Larry J. Sabato, who wrote the first scholarly book focusing on the emergence of political consultants, noted that “there is no more significant change in the conduct of campaigns than the consultants’ recent rise to prominence, if not preeminence, during the election season.”⁴

For decades, scholars, especially political scientists, have examined the question of whether or not campaigns (let alone consultants) even matter. For political consultants, the answer is obvious: yes, elections do matter, and moreover, any serious candidate would be a fool to not hire a team of experienced professionals to guide the campaign through the inevitable landmines and challenges. Some political scientists are not so sure, citing the more important effect of fundamentals, such as economic conditions, partisan affiliation, and past judgments and opinions, rather than campaign activities and consultant involvement. For these political scientists, elections and campaigning have had minimal effects on the eventual outcome. Political scientists Karen M. Kaufmann, John R. Petrocik, and Daron R. Shaw argue that both consultants and academics see reality through their own lenses: “Political science tends to produce research that is inaccessible or (especially in the view of those outside the academy) irrelevant. Consultants cherry-pick the good ideas and repackage them while simultaneously proffering their own ideas about what makes the electoral world turn.”⁵ Political scientist Ken Goldstein and his colleagues Matthew Dallek and Joel Rivlin remind us that most American elections “are driven by partisan turnout, partisan loyalty, and the behavior of swing voters,” and that while the fundamentals are central, the marginal effects of turnout and persuasion can be decisive in close contests.⁶

After reviewing several dozen scholarly findings on forecasting elections, and the impact of television and radio advertising, direct mail and telephone calls, door-to-door canvassing, candidate appearances, debates, and nominating conventions, Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw wrote that “electioneering tends to mobilize rather than persuade and typically produces small but discernible effects.”⁷ Those small but discernible effects, however, can become very significant in tight, heavily contested races.

Daron Shaw, one of the few academics who has had experience working in the field of applied politics alongside political consultants and candidates, argued

in another study that scholars started paying much more attention to the role of campaigns after the 1988 presidential election, when George H. W. Bush and his team beat back a seemingly strong challenge from Michael Dukakis, whose efforts collapsed during the final crucial months.⁸ The team of Republican veteran campaigners capitalized on focus group research to pinpoint Dukakis's weaknesses. The infamous "Willie Horton" ads bore down on Dukakis and his alleged failures as a governor, and the Dukakis campaign fumbled its response. A clear edge for Dukakis evaporated in a matter of weeks, and Bush, once politically battered and bruised, ended up victorious. A victory for the Democrats was snatched away by aggressive, negative campaigning, the likes of which had rarely been seen before in modern presidential campaigning.

Much of the "minimal effects" literature has focused on presidential general election campaigns, but, as this book will show, there is a much broader reach and impact for political consultancy—into statewide contests, ballot initiatives, issue advocacy, government relations, presidential primaries, and other aspects of politics. Political scientist Gary C. Jacobson explored the range of academic studies conducted in recent years and concluded campaigns do, in fact, matter, in many important ways. Yet the most important questions deal with "when, where, why, how, for what, and for whom" they matter.⁹

Largely their efforts are unseen by the public, but the influence and impact of political consultants often have been far-reaching. A political consultant persuaded Barry Goldwater to run for the presidency, and political consultants helped prepare a political novice, the one-time movie actor Ronald Reagan, in his quest for the governor's office in California. Unfairly or not, other consultants gave voters the lasting impression that Barry Goldwater was trigger-happy, couldn't be trusted on issues of international importance, and wanted to gut key social programs. On his way to the White House in 1980, Reagan's consultants had him concentrate on certain values, crafted by his pollster from a sophisticated hierarchy of values schema. Political consultants helped stop the Clinton health-care initiative, just as they did when Harry Truman proposed similar legislation forty-five years earlier. Political consultants have given presidents valuable insight into the mood of the public, their aspirations, and their interests. A consultant helped build the career of George W. Bush and persuade him to run for the presidency. Consultants have helped set a sharp edge to presidential elections, from Willie Horton to the half-truths and accusations found in the 2016 contest, and, with the collaboration of their clients, they have helped polarize the electorate with their biting messages. In the twenty-first century, political operatives have aided super PACs as they have built massive databases on prospective voters, fielded get-out-the-vote operations, and attacked opponents during Senate races and presidential campaigns.

Whenever a voter opens the mail and reads a direct-mail piece blasting a candidate for office, that piece was written by consultants, and often the exact words and message were tailored to that voter's detailed profile. When television viewers watch the latest 30-second ad mocking an opponent, that ad was researched, created, tested, and placed by consultants. Through social media,

political consultants were able to reach millions of new voters for Barack Obama and other candidates. When a young voter opens the Pandora app on her iPhone, and listens to her favorite Delta Rae or Skylar Grey hits, she might also find a political advertisement specifically tailored to her interests. Likewise, while watching Dish TV, a voter might see campaign commercials specifically targeted at his political and demographic profile, while the voter down the street might see political commercials that are quite different in theme and message. Psychographic targeting helped Ted Cruz figure out where to go, what to say, and who to recruit as 2016 Republican primary foot soldiers. These are all products of political consultants and their creative teams. The political consultant of decades ago relied on experience and political horse sense; today's consultants rely on metrics, algorithms, big data, and applied social science. All are seeking the same results: identify likely voters, persuade them, and get them out to vote.

What Follows

Throughout this book, several themes will unfold. First, political consultants emerged, starting in California in the 1930s and then in other parts of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, because of the crumbling of the political party as a source of manpower and strategic advice, and because of the weakening of traditional party loyalties among voters. Second, political consulting services embrace three broad categories: determining what voters want (survey research), communicating with them (media consulting, direct mail, and telephone specialists), and finding more precisely who voters are and where they reside (targeting and data mining). Third, many of the communications and targeting techniques employed by political consultants had been used for years in commercial advertising and public relations, and only later adapted for campaigns and elections. Fourth, the services of political consultants became all the more imperative because of the complexities of state and federal elections, which have become national in scope, engulfed in 24/7 media, an explosion of online and social media outlets, and seemingly unlimited campaign funds, often fueled by outside sources. Finally, as political consultancy has matured as a business, it has grown more competitive (and for some more lucrative), and firms have often merged with larger media and public relations conglomerates, serving not just candidates, but issue advocacy fights, business, and nonprofits alike.

Part I explores the beginnings of political consulting, the early use of polling, the coming of the television age, and the growth of consulting during the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter 1 focuses on the career of the first political consultants, the husband-wife team of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, who, during the 1930s through the 1950s, worked on candidate elections, ballot initiatives, and issue advocacy campaigns. Chapter 2 looks at the formative years of public opinion research, which suffered a black eye with the wildly inaccurate 1936 *Literary Digest* presidential poll and the polling fiasco during the 1948 presidential election. It introduces several of the pioneer public pollsters as well as the first important

private pollster, Louis Harris. Chapter 3 examines the beginning of radio, campaign films, and the birth of television, and how these communications media related to politics. It covers the beginning of television commercials, from the 1952 presidential campaign through the 1960 campaign.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the modern era of political consulting, with the emergence of pioneer general consultants, private pollsters, media consultants, and field operations specialists. Biographical sketches are presented of the leading pioneers in each of these fields, together with a look at the first political consulting professional organizations. Chapter 5 begins our discussion of the role of political consultants in presidential campaigns with a look at the role of media and polling consultants, in particular during the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns.

Part II of the book examines the expansion and growth of political consulting during the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter 6 looks at the major developments in campaign law and fundraising and introduces the next generation of political consultants, particularly important in general campaign management, media, and polling. Chapter 7 focuses on the evolution of polling, looking at how the science, techniques, and technology of survey research have changed. Several of the leading private pollsters are featured, and there is an examination of private polling done during the administrations of President Johnson through that of George H. W. Bush. Chapter 8 explores the media revolution, the move away from commercial advertising to political media firms, the explosion of cable television, technological advances in communication, and the fragmentation of the communications market. Several prominent media consultants are also profiled. Chapter 9 examines voter contact, through the first efforts at targeting voters, using direct mail and phone banks. Several important targeting and voter contact consultants are profiled.

Chapter 10 looks again at the role of political consultants in presidential elections. Here the presidential campaigns of 1972, 1976, and 1980 are examined. Chapter 11 examines the role of consultants in statewide contests, in congressional races, big-city mayoral contests, and the role of consultants in ballot initiatives. The final chapter in this section, chapter 12, looks at the role of political consultants during the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections.

Part III examines the transformation of political consulting from the 1990s to the present time, and the challenges ahead for consultants, US elections, and democracy. Chapter 13 focuses on the next generation of political consultants, those who became prominent during elections in the 1990s and early 2000s. Chapter 14 looks at the role of political consultants during the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections. Chapter 15 examines the technological and communication advances made during this time period, particularly in data management, microtargeting, and digital communication. Several key political consultants are profiled. Chapter 16 looks at the increasing role of political consultants in issue advocacy campaigns and in corporate and government affairs activities. Many of the features and techniques honed in political campaigns are now being used by corporations, labor unions, and others as they try to persuade the public or

elected officials on certain issues. It also looks at the trend of several prominent firms being incorporated into global public relations groups.

Chapter 17 focuses on the role of political consultants during the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns. Chapter 18 examines the increasing role of American political consultants going abroad to ply their trade for candidates for high office throughout the world. Chapter 19 looks at the role of political consultants during the 2008 and 2012 presidential races, and chapter 20 examines candidates, outside dark money, and consultants during the 2016 presidential primary season. The final chapter, chapter 21, looks at the challenges and opportunities facing the business of political consulting, the impact of American elections, and the effect on our democratic system of government.

There are two appendixes. The first is a compilation of the major consultants and political operatives in presidential elections, from 1952 through 2012, along with operatives from the 2016 presidential primaries. The second lists the political consultants who were inducted into the American Association of Political Consultants Hall of Fame.

Campaigning in the Early Republic and Nineteenth Century

Campaign operatives and election sloganeering have been around for a long time. We can go back to Roman times for the first recorded evidence of campaign operatives giving advice. In 2012, Princeton University Press reissued what could be considered the first manual on campaign consulting, Quintus Tullius Cicero's campaign handbook, *Commentariolum*, which has been given a modern title of *How to Win an Election*. Quintus Tullius (102–43 BCE) was the younger brother of the famed orator and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero, and was thought to have written the manual for his brother's electoral benefit. Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered evidence of robust politicking in the ruins of Pompeii. A century after Cicero wrote his handbook, Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, burying Pompeii and its citizens, along with some 3,000 political campaign inscriptions. As classics professor Philip Freeman described them, many of the tablets or inscriptions were from individuals and groups, hawking their favorite candidates; some were fake endorsements from “runaway slaves, gamblers and prostitutes”; others were from interest groups, like goldsmiths, grape pickers, or bartenders, urging citizens to vote for certain candidates.¹⁰

Throughout the centuries that followed, popular elections have often gone hand in hand with full-bodied debate and chicanery. From the very beginning of the American Republic, there have been robust and vigorously fought elections.¹¹ Communications professor Robert V. Friedenberg noted that the first political campaign in America of national scope was the 1787–1789 Constitution Ratification campaign, and the first political debate was between ratification advocate Theodore Sedgwick and anti-federalist John Bacon, who were seeking a seat on the Massachusetts Constitutional Ratifying Convention.¹² During the campaigns in Massachusetts and the other colonies, candidates received help

from their friends and supporters who printed campaign literature, helped craft speeches, provided food, and staged events. Soon, this pattern of political assistance was shared with others as they prepared for ratification debates in their own states.¹³

John Beckley, a close friend of Thomas Jefferson and clerk of the House of Representatives, was considered America's first campaign manager, distributing political materials and enlisting surrogates for Jeffersonian Republican candidates. Some candidates for office, like James Madison, who stood for re-election to Congress in 1790, could run from the sidelines, staying in Washington and asking key gentlemen from his home district in Virginia to back him. Others had to work hard to get elected. One Kentucky candidate in 1806 complained that to obtain a seat in Congress a man "must for at least a year before the election totally neglect his private affairs" and perpetually "take the rounds, through the district with the velocity of a race rider."¹⁴

The 1800 presidential election, with Thomas Jefferson challenging incumbent John Adams, was both "the largest and most heated" election during the first decades of the nation. Historian Robert J. Dinkin stated that, "without question, more people were involved, more literature was distributed, more canvassing went on, and more interstate coordination took place than in any presidential race before the Jacksonian period."¹⁵

During the Jacksonian era, from 1824 through 1852, there were an extraordinary number of changes in electioneering. Campaigns for president began to be coordinated nationwide, the parties were reinvigorated with nominating conventions, party platforms, and elaborate party organizations. Mass demonstrations, torchlight parades, and other devices became commonplace, and campaign fundraising became crucial for the first time.

The 1828 presidential campaign, the bitter rematch between Andrew Jackson and incumbent president John Quincy Adams, saw a number of advancements in electioneering. The voting population tripled from that of 1824 because of the growth in national population, the extension of the franchise, high interest in the contest, and an emphasis on the popular election of presidential electors. The politically savvy New York senator Martin Van Buren served as Jackson's national campaign manager and before that as William Crawford's campaign manager in 1824.¹⁶ During the election of 1836, William Henry Harrison appealed directly to the public in what might resemble the modern campaign speech.¹⁷ There was also a new way to communicate with mass audiences. On May 29, 1844, word was sent from Baltimore, Maryland, to Washington, DC, over an experimental telegraph that James Knox Polk had been selected as the Democratic Party nominee for president. For the first time, the traditional method of transmission of news, through newspapers, had been bypassed by this experimental use of electronic media.¹⁸

Following the collapse of the Whig Party in the early 1850s, came the creation of the Republican Party in 1854, and with it the beginning of what Dinkin called the "Golden Age of Parties."¹⁹ When Abraham Lincoln was running for president in 1860, Republicans created military-like organizations, called the Wide

Awakes, to drum up support and rally voters. The clubs were mostly composed of young people, who emphasized old Whig campaign tactics: “they built wigwams, raised flagpoles, displayed Lincoln fence rails, exploded fireworks, ignited bonfires, and held torch-light parades in hundreds of villages, towns, and cities.”²⁰ This was something revolutionary in American political organization. The Wide Awakes electrified the presidential election, developing a grassroots movement with hundreds of thousands of members, from Maine to California.²¹ Many of the Wide Awakes were paid by the campaign for their fieldwork. As Emerson D. Fite noted, “many men spoke every day for two or three months; ten thousand set speeches were made for Lincoln in New York State alone, 50,000 throughout the Union.”²² Other political marching clubs, some touting Stephen Douglas—the Little Giants, Ever Readys, Invincibles, and Douglas Guards—also added to the excitement and military flavor of the campaign.

Still, the presidential candidates themselves did little actual campaigning. They did not participate in the nominating process, waited at home for a party delegation to inform them that they had won the nomination, and said little or nothing during the general election campaign. Illinois senator Stephen Douglas broke this tradition in 1860. Sensing that he was trailing badly, Douglas embarked on an extended speaking tour. Another kind of politicking emerged during the 1880s with the “front porch” campaign. It was first used by Republican presidential candidate James A. Garfield, who received many groups and visitors in his hometown of Mentor, Ohio, and spoke to them, and through them, to the gathered reporters and wider public.²³

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the old “army-style” campaigning of the torchlight parades and Wide Awakes gave way to a greater emphasis on education and merchandising. Just as modern commercial advertising was beginning to catch on, presidential campaigns began creating campaign buttons, posters, cartoons, lithograph portraits of the presidential candidates, billboard likenesses, pamphlets, and tracts. In addition, electioneering stories proliferated in the 2,200 daily and 10,000 weekly, often partisan, newspapers.²⁴

Mark Hanna and William McKinley

Marcus A. (Mark) Hanna is sometimes considered to be the first modern political consultant in the United States. He was a wealthy Cleveland industrialist, who increasingly dabbled in politics. He managed the presidential campaign of US senator John Sherman of Ohio, assisted his close friend William McKinley during his campaigns for governor of Ohio, and then became McKinley’s chief adviser. Hanna retired from business in 1895 and turned to politics full time, helping McKinley’s drive toward the Republican nomination for president. Hanna served as chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC) and helped raise for McKinley a staggering \$3.5 to \$4 million in campaign contributions, mostly from corporate interests.²⁵

The 1896 election between McKinley and William Jennings Bryan was fiercely fought and brought out more voters than any other presidential election

up until this time. It took place under the cloud of national crisis, with major issues of political unrest, class conflict, economic depression, free silver, tariff, and violence stemming from labor unrest.²⁶ Hanna efficiently supervised the campaign that McKinley had devised, and thirty-year-old Chicago businessman Charles G. Dawes ran the day-to-day operation.²⁷ Bryan traveled 18,000 miles by train, reaching about 5 million people in his six hundred speeches. But McKinley decided to run a “front porch” campaign, raised and spent about \$7 million, and recruited 18,000 persons to speak on his behalf.²⁸

The 1900 re-election campaign, a rematch between McKinley and Bryan, was largely a duplication of the organization and fundraising of 1896. A total of 125 million pieces of campaign literature were distributed, along with 21 million postcards; and 2 million copies of newspaper material were sent out to over 5,000 newspapers.²⁹ Under Hanna’s direction, the Republican Party was able to raise and spend about \$2.5 million.³⁰ However, Hanna wasn’t the first operative to collect large funds from corporations. “Boss” Matthew S. Quay, a Republican senator from Pennsylvania, had perfected the art of wresting large amounts of campaign cash from business interests during the previous decade.³¹

Ohio senator John Sherman was chosen as McKinley’s secretary of state. Hanna replaced Sherman in the Senate and served in that capacity from 1897 until his death in early 1904.³² Hanna is remembered today primarily because Republican political consultant and Bush II White House operative Karl Rove called Hanna his political hero.

Over the years, there have been other “president makers,” political operatives and persons of wealth and power working behind the scenes, such as Colonel Edward House, George Harvey, and Robert Woolley during the ascendancy of Woodrow Wilson; Harry M. Daugherty for Warren G. Harding; Frank W. Stearns for Calvin Coolidge; Louis M. Howe for Franklin Roosevelt; and Joseph P. Kennedy for his son John.³³

Public Relations and Presidential Campaigning

Political campaigns today are all side shows, all honors, all bombast, glitter, and speeches. These are for the most part unrelated to the main business of studying the public scientifically, of supplying the public with party, candidate, platform, and performance, and selling the public these ideas and products.

—Edward Bernays (1928)³⁴

The business of public relations began to emerge in America around 1900. Most big corporations at the time were aloof to the press and simply shrugged off bad publicity. But there was growing public concern about the abuses of monopolies and the growth of corporate power. The early twentieth century produced reform-minded journalists like Ida Tarbell, who exposed the abuses of Standard Oil; John Spargo, who wrote about child labor; and Frank Norris, who found corruption and influence in the Southern Pacific railroad. Muckrakers had put corporations on notice that bad publicity was bad for business.³⁵

When business interests were harmed, they began to turn to public relations men to repair their public images. Ivy Lee, one of America's pioneer advertising men, opened his publicity firm in 1915 and helped the Rockefeller family restore some of its image following the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado. This was America's most violent labor strike, resulting in at least sixty-nine deaths caused by Colorado National Guardsmen and retaliating coal miners in Rockefeller-owned mines.³⁶ Lee's work on Rockefeller's behalf was characterized as "more clever and contrived than the typical work of the white-washers."³⁷ Journalist Upton Sinclair labeled him "Poison Ivy," and poet Carl Sandburg called him a "paid liar" who was "below the level of hired gunman or slugger."³⁸

Lee, who later gave us the iconic image of Betty Crocker and the memorable Wheaties slogan "Breakfast of Champions," also advised the austere John D. Rockefeller to hand out dimes to city urchins to show his kinder and gentler side. Lee never advised candidates for office, but he was a forerunner in another aspect of political consulting—the care and feeding of the image of well-known politicians and others in the public eye. But in the 1930s, Lee's considerable reputation was ruined when it was revealed that he advised Adolph Hitler on how the Nazi government could improve its image in the United States.³⁹

Albert Lasker and Warren G. Harding

During the 1916 presidential race, the George H. Batten Company became the first advertising agency to assist a presidential campaign, that of Republican nominee Charles Evans Hughes. As seen below, Batten's firm later merged with that of Bruce Barton, Roy Durstine and Alex Osborn forming Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), which became a major commercial firm and an important voice in mid-twentieth century Republican presidential campaigns.⁴⁰

Shortly after Batten assisted the Hughes campaign, another important advertising man began helping presidential candidates. Albert Lasker began by sweeping floors at the advertising firm of Lord & Thomas in 1898; fourteen years later, he owned the company. Under his guidance, Lord & Thomas reached number one in the advertising business.

By 1915, Lasker was time probably the most famous advertising man in the country (and later ranked by *Advertising Age* as the ninth most influential public relations individual in the twentieth century),⁴¹ had made Van Camp's Pork and Beans a household name throughout the country. He was so confident of his skills that he offered one year of free advertising for the cash-strapped Van Camp company. This caught the attention of industrialist William G. Irwin, one of Van Camp's major creditors and, more importantly, Republican National Committeeman from Indiana.

On Irwin's recommendation, Will Hays, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, reached out to Lasker, asking him to help the RNC in the critical 1918 congressional elections. Hays had the thankless task of trying

to halt the infighting and lingering hostilities between Taft conservatives and Roosevelt progressives. President Woodrow Wilson had made a strong push for a Democratic-controlled Congress. To counter this effort, Lasker, heading the Republican publicity team, developed this message: Wilson was ungrateful for the contributions and sacrifices made by Republican citizens and the lawmakers they had elected to office, he was power-hungry, and he was intent on depriving the people of their political rights.

Lasker had one more weapon: former Republican presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, old friends and then political enemies, publicly reconciled just one week before the November elections and urged “all Americans who are Americans first to vote for a Republican Congress.”⁴² One week later, Republicans swamped the Democrats, and now the GOP was in control of the Senate by a 49–47 margin and the House by a 239–194 margin.

The next prize for the Republicans was to recapture the White House after eight years of Democratic control. The 1920 Republican field reached nine candidates by the time of its nominating convention. California senator Hiram Johnson, retired Army general Leonard Wood of New Hampshire, Illinois governor Frank Lowden, and Ohio senator Warren G. Harding were among those vying for the nomination. Baking in the 100-degree heat in the unventilated Chicago Coliseum, the delegates were hopelessly deadlocked. After four days of the convention and four rounds of balloting, sixteen current and former US senators gathered in Suite 404 of the Blackstone Hotel, in the proverbial “smoke-filled room,” and agreed that Harding would be the party’s nominee. Yet it took until the tenth ballot on the convention floor before Harding finally had enough delegate support to secure the nomination.⁴³

Lasker had backed Hiram Johnson and didn’t really like or trust Harding, not only for the senator’s support of the League of Nations but also because of his many rumored sexual indiscretions. Nevertheless, Harding was now a client, and Lasker would do his best to help Harding beat his Democratic opponent and fellow Ohioan, Governor James M. Cox. Historian John A. Morello observed that with the 1920 election, a “new alliance had been forged between politics and modern advertising.”⁴⁴

The first objective was to create an image of Harding as a down-home, everyday fellow from small-town America—in contrast to the “stuffed shirt” brittleness of departing president Woodrow Wilson. Part of this folksy image was the creation of an old-fashioned front-porch campaign, where supplicants and admirers would visit Harding in his hometown of Marion, Ohio, rather than Harding frenetically traveling from state to state trying to woo voters. The front-porch campaign would also help meet the second objective, to keep Harding from saying something stupid on the political stump. Harding never claimed to be the brightest of candidates, and those that knew him best wanted him reined in. “Don’t let him make any speeches,” admonished Pennsylvania senator Boies Penrose, “If he goes out on tour, somebody’s sure to ask him some questions, and Warren’s just the sort of damn fool that’ll try to answer them.”⁴⁵

Harding, an old newspaperman, along with Lasker and the campaign leaders knew that they had to keep good relations with the press, many of whom were cooped up in Marion. They did so by feeding them tidbits of information, and

enough news to keep them satisfied. Radio had not become a major communication medium in 1920, but newsreels, still photography, newspaper ads, billboards, and pamphlets were important vehicles for getting out the message. Reporters were flooded with Harding campaign materials. Lasker also had a team of Hollywood stars, including Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Lillian Gish, form the Harding-Coolidge Theatrical Team and make short films extolling the virtues of the Republican ticket. Al Jolson wrote a little ditty, "Harding, You're the Man for Us."

Lasker had Harding refocus his leisure image from golf (a rich man's sport) to baseball (everyman's sport) and had the Chicago Cubs (Lasker was part owner of the team), make a special junket to Marion, where they played the local team, and Harding threw out the first three pitches. The resourceful Lasker also paid hush money (at least \$20,000) to have one of Harding's alleged lovers and her husband leave town. Lasker created a slogan for the campaign, "Let's be done with wiggle and wobble." We might scratch our heads, but "wiggle and wobble" probably meant something like "flip-flop" means today—changing policies or positions for mere political advantage. "Wiggle and wobble" became a standard line in Harding's speeches, was plastered on billboards, and appeared as the cartoon characters "Aunt Wobble" and "Uncle Wiggle" in Hearst newspapers. Lasker created special days for people to gather in Marion, like "Woman's Day" to appeal to the 20 million newly franchised women, or "Foreign Voters Day," "First Voters Day," or "Colored Voters Day."⁴⁶ He shipped 15 million pictures of Harding and Harding events to newspapers throughout the country, at the cost of \$200,000.⁴⁷

In all, Lasker applied emerging commercial advertising techniques to political campaigns: testimonials, preemptive advertising, market segmentation, a wide variety of media, including the new media of talking motion pictures and, to a lesser extent, radio. Above all, Lasker used a technique honed in his commercial advertising business: the "reason why" strategy, which gives the listener or reader a reason why they should buy a certain product, a message that should be both positive and aggressive.⁴⁸ Here, that product was Warren Gamaliel Harding, everyman. Why should you vote for him? Because he's just like you and believes what you believe.

Harding, with the help of Albert Lasker, crushed James Cox and the Democrats. Harding carried thirty-seven states, received 60.3 percent of the popular vote, and gained 404 electoral votes, while Cox received just 127 electoral votes and 34.1 percent of the popular vote.

Bruce Barton and Calvin Coolidge

While the focus was on Albert Lasker, another publicity man was working quietly with Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge. In 1919, Bruce Barton, Roy Durstine, and Alex Osborn formed an advertising agency bearing their names, which would soon dominate its field, with blue-chip clients like General Motors, General Electric, Gillette, and Standard Oil of New York.⁴⁹ Frank Stearns, a Boston department store baron, and Dwight Morrow, a partner at J. P. Morgan

and Company, wanted to boost the chances of their fellow alumnus from Amherst College, Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge. They turned to Bruce Barton, another Amherst alumnus. Barton had earlier worked with other advertisers, providing George Creel's Committee on Public Information, the pro-war propaganda bureau set up by the Wilson administration, with screenplays for films.⁵⁰ He was also the author of a wildly popular book, *The Man Nobody Knows*, a 1925 biography of Jesus, whom Barton characterized as a man's man and the "founder of modern business."⁵¹

Barton liked Coolidge, and in late 1919 he began introducing him to the wider public. First through a glowing biographical piece in *Collier's* magazine, Barton worked on the brand and image of Calvin Coolidge. As Kerry W. Buckley notes, Coolidge was introduced "not as a political commodity, not by discussing the issues of the day, but by presenting a personality with whom Americans could identify."⁵² Here was Calvin Coolidge: the courageous governor who stood up to the striking Boston policemen, the protector of American values, and a man of "unimpeachable ethnic/racial credentials." Barton crafted the image of Coolidge in his *Collier's* profile: "It sometimes seems as if this great *silent majority* had no spokesman. But Coolidge belongs with that crowd: he lives like them, he works like them, and understands."⁵³ A half century later we would hear the same themes, a great "silent majority" of Americans, with Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon as their champion.

Barton had worked with two packaged goods giants, General Mills and Lever Brothers, helping them sell cereal and soap to mass audiences. Barton felt that politicians could be sold in the same way.⁵⁴ By early 1920 he not only was a publicist, but also a strategist for Governor Coolidge. He targeted special constituencies, writing pamphlets for teachers and leaflets for the delegates to the upcoming Republican national presidential nominating convention. Barton arranged a nationwide letter-writing campaign so that the popular magazine *Literary Digest* would include Coolidge in a series of interviews about presidential contenders.⁵⁵

While Albert Lasker was burnishing Harding's image and reputation, Barton was doing the same for Coolidge. Using the advertising skills of Barton, along with the money of Frank Stearns and Frank Morrow, Coolidge was able to bypass the Republican Party. The energy and excitement over his 1920 presidential bid came almost exclusively from mass media coverage.⁵⁶ Coolidge did not win the presidential nomination that year, but the delegates—going against the wishes of Republican Party bosses—chose Coolidge as Harding's vice-presidential running mate.

While President Harding became increasingly engulfed in scandal, Bruce Barton was called upon to both burnish and protect Vice President Coolidge's image. Harding died in office in 1923, Coolidge became president, and in 1924 Coolidge ran for a full four-year term. The 1924 election has been called the "radio election," because the radio had become a common fixture in American homes. A decade before Franklin Roosevelt's radio "fireside chats," Bruce Barton advised Coolidge to tap this new medium, for "it enables the president to sit by every fireside and talk in terms of that home's interest and prosperity."⁵⁷ Barton

coached Coolidge on how to use the radio effectively. Now, for the first time in most American's lives, people could sit in their kitchen or living room and listen to the president, talking directly to them. It was an intimate, new form of communication. Barton stressed that on the radio it wasn't the ideas that mattered, but personalities. Barton urged Coolidge to begin his campaign early, in late December 1923, to take advantage of the fact that the Democrats had not picked their standard-bearer. He urged the campaign to strategically place advertising in the right periodicals, and to create a tracking system to focus on the delegates to the July 1924 Republican nominating convention.⁵⁸

During the presidential election campaign, Barton had the Coolidge campaign halt random nationwide door-to-door pamphleteering, and instead concentrate its efforts only on doubtful states. Today, candidates focus on "battleground states," the highly competitive states where the campaign will be won or lost. Barton had the same idea: Coolidge would easily win his home state of Massachusetts, but he would never win the died-in-the-wool Democratic state of Georgia. Stop wasting time and money on unwinnable or easily winnable states, he argued, and instead concentrate on those states where the margins were thin and the effort would pay off with electoral votes. Barton also stressed that campaign messages had to be crafted by professional advertisers, with style mattering more than substance. Barton urged that Coolidge take advantage of photo opportunities—and Coolidge would go out of his way to please photojournalists, even famously donning a Sioux Indian headdress in 1927.⁵⁹

Bruce Barton later entered the arena of politics himself, and he was elected to the House of Representatives in 1937. There, he was a fierce and vocal opponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt—and the feeling was mutual. In the heat of his presidential re-election campaign in October 1940, Roosevelt derisively told an audience at Madison Square Garden that if it were up to "Martin, Barton, and Fish," there would never have been a program to help the British fight against Germany. Martin was the Republican leader Joseph Martin of Massachusetts, and Hamilton Fish of New York was chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Barton was finishing his career as a New York congressman and was in the thick of an unsuccessful fight to become a US senator. The next time Roosevelt spoke, in Boston, the audience beat him to it, shouting out the tag line of "Martin, Barton, and Fish." The Democrat's campaign slogan for the 1940 election, thus, came alive during the week before Election Day.⁶⁰ Later, Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential candidate in 1940, lamented, "When I heard the president hang the isolationist votes of Martin, Barton and Fish on me, and get away with it, I knew I was licked."⁶¹

After losing his Senate race, Barton toyed with some other political opportunities, but he eventually returned to BBDO and public relations. He openly supported Wendell Willkie over Thomas Dewey in 1940, but four years later he became part of a volunteer group, "the highest-paid public-relations minds" who met in New York City to help Dewey's 1944 presidential campaign come up with campaign ideas.⁶² Barton helped Dewey again in 1948, and in his 1950 gubernatorial bid. Later, *Ad Age* recognized Barton as the fifteenth most influential public

relations person in the twentieth century.⁶³ As seen in chapter 3, BBDO worked for the Republican National Committee and Dwight Eisenhower during his re-election campaign in 1956, and in presidential campaigns during the 1960s.⁶⁴

Edward L. Bernays, the "Father of Spin"

Also helping Coolidge was the man later dubbed "the father of modern public relations" and the "father of spin," Edward L. Bernays.⁶⁵ Born in Austria in 1891, the nephew (twice over) of Sigmund Freud, Bernays began his public relations career in the United States in the 1910s, and was part of George Creel's US Committee on Public Information, the American World War I propaganda effort to "Make the World Safe for Democracy." In the 1920s, he worked for American Tobacco Company, linking Lucky Strike cigarettes to the women's rights movement, by having women marchers in New York City hold up Luckys as "torches of freedom." He also helped Procter and Gamble sell Ivory soap by setting up a nationwide soap-carving contest, with cash awards and plenty of press coverage; that contest lasted more than thirty-five years, until 1961.⁶⁶

The problem with John Calvin Coolidge Jr., as Bruce Barton well understood, was that he seemed cold and aloof. He was "Silent Cal," speaking only when necessary. (An often-repeated story tells of a young woman at a dinner party betting that she could make Coolidge say three words. "You lose," said Coolidge, without looking up).⁶⁷ Theodore Roosevelt's irrepressible daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, once said Coolidge was so sour he seemed to have been "weaned on a pickle."⁶⁸

Enter Edward Bernays to help with a presidential personality makeover. Perhaps stealing from Albert Lasker's playbook, Bernays, just weeks before the 1924 election, brought a troop of forty Broadway performers on a midnight train from New York to Washington. Departing from Union Station in Washington, they formed a caravan of Cadillacs, shuttling to the White House, where the Coolidges were awaiting them for breakfast. After a pancake and sausage breakfast, they went out to the White House lawn, where the singer Al Jolson serenaded the president with a rousing song, "Keep Coolidge." And then something remarkable happened: the president smiled, and then he laughed.

The newspapers had a field day: the *New York Times* proclaimed "Actors Eat Cakes with the Coolidges . . . President Nearly Laughs," while the *New York Review* went even further: "Jolson Makes President Laugh for the First Time in Public."⁶⁹ In a stroke, Coolidge's image was reshaped (at least for the moment). Who knows if this helped, but Coolidge easily defeated the Democratic candidate, John W. Davis, with Coolidge receiving 382 electoral votes (54.0 percent) to 136 electoral votes (28.8 percent) for Davis. Davis won the old Confederate states, but nothing else. Coolidge won the rest of the country, except for Wisconsin, which went for progressive candidate and favorite son, Robert M. La Follette.

President Herbert Hoover, facing a tough re-election fight, was impressed by what Bernays had done for Coolidge. In October 1932, just a month before the election, Hoover called Bernays to figure out how to beat back the formidable

challenge of New York governor Franklin Roosevelt and the constant stream of bad economic news being dumped on his presidency. Bernays wanted to recruit some 25,000 disinterested thought leaders, in a Non-Partisan Fact-Finding Committee, that would get the word out that the economy wasn't as bad as people thought, and that with Hoover re-elected to a second term, things would get better. But the cold, hard facts suggested otherwise, and 13 million people (23.6 percent of the adult population, the highest percentage ever recorded in US history) were out of work. Bernays's public relations magic could only go so far, and the public wasn't buying it or Hoover. The president was crushed by Roosevelt, offering a "New Deal," and capturing 472 electoral votes to Hoover's 59.⁷⁰

At the same time that he helped Hoover, Bernays became public relations adviser to George Z. Medalie, the US attorney in New York, who was running against US senator Robert F. Wagner. Bernays wanted a bright, young liaison between his office and Medalie's, and he was given a young assistant US attorney, Thomas E. Dewey. This was Dewey's "first introduction to public relations, and he liked it," Bernays wrote.⁷¹ Dewey would go on to become a famous US attorney who successfully prosecuted mobsters, was elected governor of New York, and was twice the presidential nominee for the Republican Party. But it took Dewey a long time to warm up to the idea of professional help for his own campaigns.

By 1940 Bernays was using much more sophisticated methods for campaign strategy. His client was William O'Dwyer, the district attorney for Brooklyn, who had become famous in prosecuting Murder, Inc., an organized crime syndicate. O'Dwyer was trying to unseat New York City's two-term mayor, Fiorello La Guardia. Bernays, contacted just two months before the election, gave campaign communications and message advice that was far ahead of its time. "I can only give you advice if I first know what people's attitudes are," wrote Bernays. "What do people expect of the mayor? What do they think of La Guardia? And what are the issues they associate you two men with?"⁷²

Bernays had his staff fan out into each of the five boroughs of the city, survey thousands of potential voters, and ask them about their political attitudes. He then broke down the voters into ethnic and religious backgrounds, and conducted a "psychological survey." In his forty-six pages of recommendations, he targeted various audiences and suggested the kind of appeal that should be stressed for each. Targeting, survey research, and message development are done today on a very sophisticated level, but in 1940 campaigns this was unheard of.⁷³

Bernays stressed message discipline, encouraging O'Dwyer to stick to basic themes. He also stressed the importance of individual words, giving a list of verbs that should guide the campaign's actions: ask, promise, appeal, urge, hope, advocate, declare, reveal, and others. Some political consultants today specialize in finding the right words for their candidates.⁷⁴ O'Dwyer narrowly lost to La Guardia, but he came back in 1944 to win the mayoral race.

Bernays admired James A. Farley, the Democratic Party's chairman who helped sell Roosevelt to the public in 1932. Farley told Bernays that the secret was, above all, that FDR had a great and memorable last name, a wonderful smile, and a great voice. Farley also engaged in a massive letter-writing campaign, sending

individual letters to some 3,000 national, state, county, and city Democratic leaders, even to precinct captains. He bought a check-signing machine, signed the letters in green ink, and waited for the flood of letters that came back saying that Democratic leaders were behind Roosevelt.⁷⁵

While earlier presidential campaigns had hired advertising specialists, the Alf Landon presidential campaign in 1936 was the first to hire full-time a commercial advertising agency. That agency, Blackett-Sample-Hummert of Chicago, was known for burnishing the image of Oxydol, Parker Pens, Lava Soap, and Gold Medal flour, and it would try to do the same for the Kansas governor. But when word got out about the advertising arrangement, Landon was accused by his opponents of being “sold” through some “well-conceived marketing plan.”⁷⁶ There may indeed have been a well-conceived marketing plan, but Landon went down to ignominious defeat, winning only Maine and Vermont.

While Lasker, Barton, Bernays, and other ad men dabbled in campaigns and politics, their real bread and butter came from commercial advertising. Yet one husband-wife California public relations agency, beginning in the 1930s, made politics their full-time business, and began what we today know as the business of political consulting.

PART I

The Early Business of Political
Consulting, 1930s–1960s

CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning, Whitaker and Baxter

It was no accident that California inspired the first experiment in professional campaign management.

—Greg Mitchell (1992)

More Americans Like Corn than Caviar.

—Whitaker & Baxter, Public Relations Rule No. 10 (1935)

Whitaker & Baxter remain the giants in the field today.

—Robert J. Pitchell (1958)

CALIFORNIA, OFTEN THE trendsetter in fashion, culture, and ideas, was also the home of the first full-time political consulting firms. Why California? Robert J. Pitchell and others¹ have noted several factors. First, Californians amended their state constitution in 1911 to allow direct democracy, giving individual citizens and interest groups a direct voice in lawmaking through initiatives, referendums, and the recall of elected officials. But activists and groups needed help in organizing, collecting signatures on petitions, and communicating their concerns to others in order to pass citizen-driven propositions. With few exceptions, political parties did not become involved in the management of initiatives and referendums, and this vacuum was filled by private consultants.

Second was the immense size of the state, with the population centers of San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Diego spread apart by hundreds of miles. In many ways, the centers of population were politically and culturally dissimilar to each other. Further, the state experienced a population explosion, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, with millions of easterners, midwesterners, and southerners—with no ties to California politics and political parties—migrating to the Golden State. Third was the rise of political awareness among Californians, particularly during the 1930s with Dr. Francis Townsend's

old-age pension scheme and Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement, both drawing enormous grassroots support. The public had become increasingly aware of its power to affect legislation.

Fourth, political party organizations were nearly nonexistent, thanks in part to California's system of nonpartisan municipal elections. The Democratic and Republican Parties were weak and unable to operate effective political campaigns even for their own candidates.² Finally, California was America's new dream factory: Hollywood press agents and their publicity machine hawked talent, elevating the ordinary into the magical, making busboys and waitresses into stars and starlets, and propelling local talent into elective office.

Into this world came Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter.

"Government by Public Relations"

In 1951, Carey McWilliams, a political reporter for the *Nation* magazine, wrote that Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter had created something new in American politics. Theirs was "the first public-relations firm to specialize exclusively in political public relations."³ They had been successfully doing so for fifteen years, under the name of Campaigns, Inc., but were more often referred to simply as Whitaker & Baxter. The firm, McWilliams observed, "evolved a style of operation which makes the old-fashioned boss and lobbyist completely obsolete. Whitaker & Baxter has ushered in a new era of American politics—government by public relations."⁴

In the 1930s, the business of campaign consulting or campaign management was simply unknown. Up until that time, campaigns were, in Leone Baxter's words, "the natural province of broken down politicians and camp followers."⁵ Most campaigns had little understanding of strategic planning, few had workable campaign budgets, and for the most part they were without direction.

Before he was eighteen, Clement S. (Clem) Whitaker (1899–1961) became a reporter for the *Sacramento Union*, covering the state capitol. He later worked as the leading crime reporter for the *Union*. His son, Clem Jr., recalled, "Every murder that happened, every hanging that happened, whatever, that was my father's assignment. So we used to get some of the gory details as these things were going on."⁶

After serving a short stint in the US Army during World War I, Whitaker returned to the *Union* as an editor, and he later wrote a daily column for the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*. From 1921 to 1930, he operated Capitol News Bureau, a news service that provided stories for more than eighty California newspapers, then sold it to United Press. Leone Baxter (1906–2001) was the manager of the Redding, California, Chamber of Commerce, and had been sent to Sacramento to work on a referendum.⁷

Clem Whitaker got involved in politics when his barber complained that his profession was having trouble getting a bill passed to create a state board of barber examiners. The old way of hiring a lobbyist, twisting some legislators' arms, hadn't worked. Whitaker had an idea: rely on barbers themselves, turn them into

a grassroots lobby, and have them put pressure on their lawmakers back in their hometowns. The barbers liked the idea, and, for a fee of \$4,000, Clem Whitaker had created a new business.⁸

The Central Valley Project

Clem Whitaker decided to continue this new line of business. His next client was John B. McColl, from Red Bluff, whom he helped get elected to the California Senate.⁹ Later, the legislature passed a McColl bill that authorized a \$170 million bond issue for the Central Valley Project Act, an ambitious plan to provide irrigation and public power. Opposing the Central Valley Project was Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), the giant public utility company. PG&E sought to defeat the project through a referendum, and it was ready to pour unlimited amounts of money into accomplishing its goal. On the advice of his friend Sheridan Downey, Whitaker hired Leone Baxter, who was working against the referendum for the Redding Chamber of Commerce.

Whitaker and Baxter called their firm Campaigns, Inc.,¹⁰ and with a budget of \$40,000 they bypassed the political parties. Using newspaper advertising and editorials, they went directly to the people to fight against the PG&E-backed referendum. They managed to get their message out to nearly every small-town radio station and newspaper outlet. They also made extensive use of radio, probably the first such use in a statewide campaign, handling everything from scripts to sound effects.¹¹ Clem Whitaker called this their “toughest” campaign, but they were able to defeat the referendum by 33,063 votes. Five years later, PG&E hired Whitaker & Baxter to oppose the “unfreezing” of the revenue bonds. Now working on the other side of the issue, Whitaker & Baxter was again successful. Pacific Gas and Electric had learned a valuable lesson, and from then on kept Whitaker & Baxter on an annual retainer.¹²

The 1934 California Governor’s Race

The average American doesn’t want to be educated. He doesn’t . . . even want to work, consciously, at being a good citizen. But there are two ways you can interest him in a campaign. . . . Most every American likes a contest. He likes a good hot battle, with no punches pulled. So you can interest him if you put on a fight. Then, too, most every American likes to be entertained . . . he likes fireworks and parades. So if you can’t fight, put on a show!

—Clem Whitaker (1934)¹³

In August 1934, California was stunned when Upton Sinclair—the muckraking author of *The Jungle*, avowed socialist, and leader of the End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement—won the Democratic primary for governor. Sinclair had been a Democrat for just a year, and he used the EPIC movement as his springboard to elective office. Sinclair’s plan to end poverty involved taking idle land and factories in California and turning them over to cooperatives of unemployed workers. During the depths of the Great Depression, Sinclair’s scheme caught fire. There

were hundreds of EPIC clubs throughout California, and through his strong grassroots appeal, Sinclair overwhelmed his moderate Democratic opponent in the gubernatorial primary.

Sinclair and his movement were part of a much broader pattern of social unrest and turmoil, from politicians like Floyd B. Olson of Minnesota and Robert M. La Follette Sr. of Wisconsin, who were calling for democratic socialist reforms; to Huey Long in Louisiana, calling for “sharing the wealth”; to Dr. Francis E. Townsend’s wildly popular Old Age Revolving Pension Plan, begun in Long Beach.

Conservative and monied interests were alarmed at the thought of Sinclair “Sovietizing” California, and they strongly backed the lackluster lieutenant governor, Frank Merriam, who was the Republican candidate for governor. In southern California, Albert Lasker’s advertising agency Lord & Thomas was hired to assist Merriam. Lord & Thomas had created the widely popular radio show *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, and it used its skills to create anti-Sinclair soap operas. The firm also employed a sophisticated direct-mail program, targeting specific groups, and sent out appeals to out-of-state donors.¹⁴

Clem Whitaker had been approached to work for the Merriam campaign in northern California. But he balked. Whitaker thought Merriam was an “incompetent fool,” and, more directly, he wasn’t going to be simply one player in a larger campaign organization—he’d handle a campaign himself and run the whole show, or not play at all.¹⁵ Sinclair was a friend of Whitaker’s family, particularly Clem’s socialist father, a Baptist preacher. But Clem couldn’t abide the radical ideas of their old family friend. Whitaker later admitted that “it’s always difficult to fight a campaign against a man you like personally.”¹⁶

Nor would he work for one of his closest friends, Sheridan Downey, who was running for lieutenant governor. Downey, a Democrat, and the man who introduced Whitaker to the woman he would eventually marry, was playing for the wrong team. Instead, Whitaker took on his first major candidate, George Hatfield, a prominent San Francisco attorney, who was running on the Republican ticket for lieutenant governor.

While they nominally worked for Hatfield, Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter focused their attention on destroying Sinclair. One of the first things they did was hole up in Sacramento, and for three days they poured through the voluminous—and politically charged—writings of Sinclair. They read every one of Sinclair’s books and tracts, and lifted juicy quotes that made Sinclair appear radical or would offend voters.¹⁷ Later, Clem Whitaker, when asked why Sinclair lost, said simply, “Upton was beaten because he had written books.”¹⁸

The job was made easy by the astonishing range of institutions that were condemned by Sinclair: he went after the American Legion, the Boy Scouts of America, Christian Scientists, Baptists, the University of California, and the city of San Francisco, among others. The political consultants took phrases out of context and edited quotes to make them more scandalous—for example, they quoted Sinclair as saying that wedded bliss was nothing more than “marriage plus prostitution,” and that every religion was a “mighty fortress of graft.” If that

weren't enough, Whitaker and Baxter excerpted quotes from dialogue spoken by unsavory characters in Sinclair's novels. From a 1910 Sinclair novel, they cobbled together three different lines of dialogue: "The sanctity of marriage . . . I have had such a belief . . . I have it no longer." The words were exact, but chopped from different sentences, and readers of anti-Sinclair editorials and pamphlets had no way of knowing that this was fictional material.¹⁹

At the same time, the state Republican Party hired Clem Whitaker to create and serve as the publicist for the California League Against Sinclairism (CLAS), a front group for big-money interests in northern California (a similar group, United for California, operated in the southern part of the state). Clem's job, again, was to smear the reputation of Upton Sinclair. Whitaker used direct mail, but he also found a lucrative business in using his Capitol News Service and his own advertising agency. Whitaker was cozy with about 700 newspaper publishers throughout the state: in those lean Depression years, the newspapermen needed every dime of advertising they could get. Clem Whitaker provided the newspapers with professionally written copy, "suggested editorials," and "news stories" about the horrors of Sinclair. His art director provided the newspapers with cartoons, one showing a big boot ready to stamp out an entire town dotted with church steeples; the caption merely read: "SINCLAIRISM." Whitaker shrewdly paid in advance for campaign advertising in these same newspapers. What followed was a relentless barrage of editorials, stories, pictures, and cartoons that savaged Sinclair.²⁰

Perhaps for the first time, the motion picture industry became a major player in disseminating political campaign propaganda. One of its leaders, Louis B. Mayer, the president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), was also the vice chairman of the Republican State Central Committee. Mayer and other studio heads threatened to pull the movie industry out of California if Sinclair were elected governor. During the campaign, the studios raised a half-million dollars to help Frank Merriam, extracting part of the fund from one day's wages from their employees.²¹

Movies and newsreels depicted the horrors of a California filled with the kinds of motley people Sinclair would supposedly attract. One newsreel showed vagrants (actually actors) headed to California to take advantage of Sinclair's supposed welfare schemes. A bearded actor with a thick fake Russian accent said he would vote for Sinclair because "his system vorked vell in Russia, vy can't it vork here?"²²

But Sinclair's problems extended beyond the constant media attacks orchestrated by Whitaker & Baxter and the Hollywood studios. Sinclair at times was his own worst enemy. He made some off-the-cuff but costly remarks, saying, for example, "I expect half of the unemployed in the U.S. to flock to California if I'm elected."²³ Californians were reminded of this quip when anti-Sinclair forces rented 2,000 billboards across the state and reproduced that impolitic remark on them.²⁴ Despite Sinclair's urging, President Franklin Roosevelt would not endorse him and his movement, giving many California Democrats the excuse they were looking for to jump to the Republican side. Added to this was another candidate,

Raymond L. Haight of the Commonwealth-Progressive Party, who drained votes away from Sinclair.²⁵

Merriam won the election, but not by an overwhelming margin. In a record-breaking turnout, Merriam received 1,138,620 votes to Sinclair's 879,537; Haight received 302,519 votes. This was an extraordinary election, one that journalist Greg Mitchell dubbed the "Campaign of the Century." Political scientist Walt Anderson observed that the "real significance of the Sinclair-Merriam campaign lies in the fact that a candidate—perhaps for the first time in American history, although certainly not for the last—was defeated, not by his opponent, but by a planned and coordinated use of the mass media of communications."²⁶ Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. was blunt, calling this gubernatorial contest "the first all-out public relations Blitzkrieg in American politics."²⁷ That media attack was thanks in no small part to Whitaker & Baxter's efforts.

While Sinclair lost the gubernatorial race, many Democrats were nonetheless elected to the state legislature. One of those swept into office on the EPIC-Democratic ticket of 1934 was Culbert Olson, who won a seat in the California Assembly. Four years later, Olson defeated the hapless Frank Merriam to become governor of California.

How Whitaker & Baxter Operated

At the time that Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter opened their political campaign firm, campaigns were hardly considered businesses. Whitaker & Baxter would offer something new. The tired old political bosses could never stand up to a modern, hard-hitting public relations campaign, said Whitaker. It was necessary to build public attitudes by analyzing different political markets, employing alternative ways of framing appeals, and a variety of methods to distribute ideas.

Furthermore, they would offer full-service campaign management, a one-stop shop for candidates and their campaigns. "The candidate," wrote journalist Greg Mitchell, "just had to *be*—neither the candidate nor party headquarters had to *do*."²⁸ The candidate did not have to rely on party bosses for their approval, ward heelers to approve the message, or party hacks to chase after voters.

For a gubernatorial campaign, Whitaker & Baxter would set up an elaborate statewide organization, designed to do what a party organization would do, but without the problems associated with political party dynamics.²⁹ Their staff, normally about sixteen or twenty, would expand to forty or eighty, with northern and southern chairmen appointed as fundraisers and goodwill ambassadors for the candidate. After that, county, district, and local chairs were chosen, and then volunteer committees were created. The volunteers would be responsible for leaflet and publicity drops, speakers' bureaus, and other grassroots efforts.³⁰

In the age before television, Whitaker & Baxter used a variety of communication tools. From a description of its services for a 1948 ballot issue, we see how the firm planned to communicate with the state's 4.5 million voters. Whitaker & Baxter mailed out 10 million pamphlets and leaflets, 4.5 million postcards, and 50,000 letters. It bought 70,000 inches of newspaper advertising in 700 daily and

weekly newspapers; showed film trailers in 160 theaters, watched by 2 million people a week; bought 3,000 radio spots on 109 radio stations and twelve 15-minute radio network shows; and purchased 1,000 fourteen-sheet billboards and 20,000 posters. Whitaker & Baxter also used sound trucks, newspaper cartoons, and even skywriting.³¹

They honed in on certain mass communications techniques. For example, issues had to be distilled into themes or slogans, with simplicity and clarity. The appeal had to capture public attention and not simply focus on politics. There also needed to be a “gimmick.” For example, during a 1948 referendum to repeal California’s railroad full-crew law (what opponents called the “featherbedding” issue), Whitaker & Baxter had a campaign-created song, “I’ve Been Loafing on the Railroad,” sung five to ten times a day for a month over 200 radio stations. For a school-aid initiative, they chose a catchy rhyme: “For Jimmy and me, vote ‘yes’ on 3.” They targeted specific audiences, using market segmentation, to reach various racial, religious, economic, occupational, and sectional concerns.³²

Whitaker & Baxter also invented the sinister “Faceless Man,” the unnamed opponent against whom its candidate or cause could fight. In 1946, San Francisco mayor Roger Lapham was confronted with a recall election. There was no adversary; just his record as mayor. Lapham hired Whitaker, and Clem created an evil, anonymous opponent to fight against. Billboards and newspaper ads would show the shadowy profile of a man. But who was he? What were his intentions? What terrible things was he trying to do against Mayor Lapham? Why won’t he come forward? The imaginary enemy, the “faceless man,” became the target, and voters in the end refused to kick Lapham out of office.³³

Journalist Irwin Ross stated that Whitaker & Baxter’s “peculiar contribution” had been to make “a precise art of oversimplification, to systematize irrational appeals, to merchandise propaganda through a relentless exploitation of every means of mass communication.”³⁴ In their own defense, and in a more reflective moment years later, Clem Whitaker said that “we search our souls to be sure we are not using tactics that will do damage to society.” Leone Baxter reflected on the 1934 battle against Upton Sinclair: “We wouldn’t operate like that now, would we, Clem?” she said to her husband.³⁵

Working for and against Earl Warren

Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter were hired to help California attorney general Earl Warren in his 1942 bid to oust Culbert Olson as governor. In the primary election, Warren ran an intensive, tiring, “economy-class” campaign throughout the state, and he had no real opposition on the Republican side. He easily won, pulling in 90 percent of the total Republican vote. On the Democratic side, where Warren was also on the ballot, voters were demoralized. Fewer than 50 percent of eligible citizens came out to vote, and Warren wound up with 404,778 votes, with only 515,144 going to the Democratic incumbent, Governor Olson.

Warren’s platform included charges against Olson that sounded faintly like the Willie Horton charges against Governor Michael Dukakis some forty years

later. The “darkest chapter” of Olson’s administration, Warren charged, was his policy of pardoning criminals. Olson had released 28 percent of convicted criminals, “of whom 207 had been convicted of rape and 285 of other sex crimes.”³⁶

Until this time, Warren was a cautious politician, projecting a stern law-enforcement persona. But his public image would soon change: Whitaker & Baxter would humanize him. Years later, the reporter Carey McWilliams recalled his reaction: after Warren announced his candidacy for governor, he said, “I still remember the shock.” Warren was at a grunion hunt, a uniquely California experience where revelers go down to the beach, build a bonfire, drink beer, and capture and eat the small, slimy fish.

Here was our candidate for governor in a bathing suit, laughing and running up and down the beach, etc., etc. Now I had never seen a photograph of Warren like this. *Never*. When I first saw it, I said to myself, “That is the hand of Whitaker & Baxter. They are humanizing this man. They are making him a very—you know.”³⁷

From then on, Warren was photographed with his large and handsome family, smiling, playing together, eating dinner, projecting the image of a warm and friendly father who just happened to be running for governor. Indeed, *Time* magazine noted that Whitaker & Baxter had taught Earl Warren “how to smile in public, and were the first to recognize the publicity value of his handsome family.”³⁸

Yet, despite Whitaker & Baxter’s assistance, it was still Earl Warren in charge of the campaign. As the Republican operative Murray Chotiner remarked, “Warren remained his own campaign manager. Others could set up committees, do the organizing, perform the routine jobs. It was Warren, however, who set the tone and philosophy of his campaign. He either made, or approved, every major decision. I would say that no one ever ran Warren’s campaigns except Warren himself.”³⁹

But in the last week of the campaign, Warren fired Whitaker (whose name Warren consistently misspelled in his memoirs)⁴⁰ and totally broke off communications with him. Warren wanted to run a nonpartisan campaign, hoping to draw Independents and Democrats as well as Republicans to his side. In fact as seen above, he filed for both the Democratic and Republican nominations, running under the platform that “partisan politics had no place and must be eliminated, so that we can give President Roosevelt our unqualified support.”⁴¹ The trouble was, that Frederick N. Howser, a Los Angeles lawyer, had been chosen as Warren’s running mate, and Howser insisted that the two Republicans run as a unified ticket. Warren said no, that this would go against his nonpartisan approach. “Finally,” Warren wrote in his memoirs, Howser “personally told me that if I did not announce such a ticket, he would announce his withdrawal from the campaign, and say I had double-crossed him.” But Howser didn’t withdraw, and Warren was under great pressure to announce the Warren-Howser ticket. Warren remained adamant: he had always viewed the governorship as a

bipartisan office, and he ran in the primaries of both parties.⁴² Then, just one week before the election, Clem Whitaker announced from Warren's San Francisco campaign office that Warren and Howser would indeed run as a team. A furious Warren, campaigning in another part of the state, called Whitaker, telling him to close down the office and issue no more bulletins. "That was my last personal experience with Whitaker," Warren wrote, "and as far as I know it was his last important political campaign during the years I was governor. This is not to say I injured his business, as I was thereafter indirectly responsible for his making a fortune."⁴³

Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter would indeed reap a fortune, and that fortune came as a result of Warren's health-care proposal, and eventually the American Medical Association's battle against Harry Truman's national health insurance proposal.

The CMA and Warren's Health-Care Proposals

In 1938, Californians elected Culbert Olson as governor. He was the first Democrat elected to this office in decades, and one of his first acts was to propose a statewide health insurance plan that would cover employees with incomes below \$3,000 (90 percent of the workforce) on a compulsory basis, while the self-employed could join voluntarily. The state seemed ready for such a bold proposal. In 1935, 1936, and 1937, the California Medical Association (CMA) had backed a form of compulsory state health insurance; then, in 1938, the Democratic platform called for such a program.⁴⁴ Olson naively assumed that the Democrats in the legislature would go along with his health insurance proposal, but ultimately the lukewarm reception from Democrats and opposition from doctors and business interests killed his plan.

Earl Warren and Culbert Olson disagreed on many issues, but once sworn into office, Warren decided to move ahead on a state health insurance scheme. In the fall of 1944, Warren had been hospitalized with a kidney infection, and that episode apparently focused his attention on the financial and personal consequences of catastrophic illness.⁴⁵ While not acknowledging it in his memoirs, Warren used the Olson plan as his starting point. Warren, usually an adroit politician, stumbled when launching his relatively modest health-care plan. He assumed the public would be on his side and would put pressure on the legislature, but he had not prepared the public for this policy initiative, and the support was simply not forthcoming. Nor did Warren prepare those legislators who were outside his inner circle of advisers on his plan.⁴⁶

One group that was quite concerned about Warren's proposal was the CMA. One decade after its endorsement of a state health insurance program, the CMA was now firmly against such a scheme. In late 1944, Warren met with a contingent of doctors from the CMA to outline his plan. Warren considered this a courtesy call (and perhaps tacit approval from the doctors), but the CMA wanted more. The doctors wanted Warren to speak at their 1945 statewide House of Delegates meeting, and not announce his program until after hearing from the assembled

members. But Warren went ahead and announced his plan in late 1944. The CMA, and particularly Dr. John W. Cline (later the president of CMA), were furious.⁴⁷

Cline hired Whitaker & Baxter to handle the campaign against Warren's health insurance plan. Clem Whitaker was still smarting from his sacking at the end of the 1942 Warren gubernatorial campaign. As his son, Clem Jr., allowed, "I know that my father felt very strongly that he did not want to have anything to do with Earl Warren."⁴⁸ It would thus be sweet revenge to oppose a major policy initiative of Warren's.

The Whitaker & Baxter-CMA strategy involved attacking Warren's health insurance plan but also proposing an alternative, the California Physicians' Service, a private, voluntary insurance program that later became Blue Shield. Altogether, Warren proposed three versions in the course of three different sessions of the legislature. All were beaten back by the grassroots efforts orchestrated by Whitaker & Baxter: legislators received anti-health insurance letters and editorials from hundreds of groups throughout the state; a 9,000-doctor speaker's bureau was created to send delegations of physicians to Sacramento to lobby lawmakers and visit city and county officials; and 70,000 inches of advertising space in newspapers were purchased throughout the state.⁴⁹

In his memoirs, Earl Warren remembered the struggle and the complete change in attitude of the CMA: "The principle of insurance which was by them [CMA] described as social progress in 1935 had become ten years later, 'socialized medicine, Communist-inspired.' . . . Nevertheless, they [doctors] stormed the legislature with their invective, and my bill[s] [were] not even accorded a decent burial."⁵⁰

As late as 1966, a good twenty years after the California health insurance battles, the firm of Whitaker & Baxter still took credit for "the successful public-opinion campaign in opposition to former Governor Earl Warren's compulsory health-insurance program."⁵¹

The AMA and National Health Insurance

While the California Medical Association and Whitaker & Baxter were fighting back Warren's compulsory health insurance proposals, the American Medical Association (AMA), based in Chicago, was warily monitoring national legislation in Washington. During World War II, legislation pushed by Representative John D. Dingell Sr. (Michigan), Senator Robert F. Wagner (New York), and Senator James E. Murray (Montana) sought a federal system of hospital and medical coverage, funded through the payroll tax mechanism of Social Security. This Democratic plan, called the Wagner-Murray-Dingell plan, was the first real attempt at a federal health insurance program. It was first submitted to Congress in 1943, and resubmitted in 1945, 1947, and 1949.⁵²

When Harry Truman won the 1948 presidential election, many were stunned. Nearly every commentator, pollster, and editorial writer had written off the Harry Truman-Alben Barkley ticket, knowing that there was no way it could stop Thomas Dewey and his running mate, Earl Warren. But not only did Truman

retain the presidency, but Democrats also won seventy-five additional seats to regain control of the House of Representatives.

Perhaps most alarmed was the AMA, because with Democrats now in the majority in both the House and Senate, Truman was ready to launch a series of political reforms, including national health insurance. In his State of the Union speech, on January 4, 1949, Truman was emphatic:

We must spare no effort to raise the general level of health in this country. In a nation as rich as ours, it is a shocking fact that tens of millions lack adequate medical care. We are short of doctors, hospitals, nurses. We must remedy these shortages. Moreover, we need—and we must have without further delay—a system of prepaid medical insurance which will enable every American to afford good medical care.⁵³

For years, the AMA had feared that this moment would come. In preparation, it first removed its hide-bound chief spokesman, Dr. Morris Fishbein, and then it hired Whitaker & Baxter to assist it in fighting against any national effort. Whitaker & Baxter moved to Chicago to set up its own war room, and it remained there for the next three-and-a-half years.

In early 1949, Clem Whitaker prepared an overall battle plan for the fight against Truman's health insurance proposal. It sounded familiar themes that were first used in the fight against Earl Warren's California plan: "First, this is an affirmative campaign. Defeating compulsory health insurance is the immediate job, but stopping the agitation for compulsory health insurance, by enrolling the people in sound voluntary health insurance systems, is our most important objective. That's the only way to resolve this."

"Second," Whitaker continued, "this must be a *broad, public* campaign—with leaders in every walk of life participating—not just a doctor's campaign. . . . *A simple campaign program, vigorously and carefully carried out, is much more effective than an ambitious, complicated program, with some of the bases left uncovered.*"⁵⁴

Clem Whitaker adopted a more acerbic tone at the National Editorial Association (NEA) meeting in Chicago, in November 1949. The assembled 500 members of the NEA heard Whitaker proclaim:

This isn't a fight for freedom of medicine. This is a fight for freedom of the individual from government domination. The American people must be aroused to come to their own defense. They must be told the blunt truth, that the welfare state is a slave state, and that the cancerous growth of government-dependency is the most dangerous sickness in our world today.

American doctors have become the second greatest force in the nation, second only to the American press, in alerting the people to the danger of socialized medicine.⁵⁵

“Socialized medicine” was the perfect, damning label to wrap around Truman’s national health-care plan. It played on the fears of Americans, afraid of some unknown socialist, even communist, menace. It fit in nicely with the red-baiting of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and rising stars in the post–World War II Red Scare, such as the young Richard Nixon of California and Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin. Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter weren’t the first to use the term, but they indeed knew how to exploit it.⁵⁶

Mike Gorman, a newspaper reporter in Oklahoma, was fired from his job for writing an article favorable to the idea of national health in early 1949. Gorman returned to his home in California, and a few days later he received a telephone call from Clem Whitaker, asking him to join Whitaker & Baxter as it geared up to fight Truman’s plans. Gorman averred, saying that he didn’t think anything could stop the president’s plan. “Oh, that’s easy,” said Whitaker, adding:

We’ve been through this fight with Governor Warren’s proposal for a state health insurance program and it’s a cinch to beat it. In order to do so, there are only two things you have to have. First you have to give the program a bad name and we’re going to call it ‘socialized medicine’ because the idea of socialism is very unpopular in the United States. . . . The second thing you have to have is a devil. You have to have a devil in the picture to paint him in all his horns and we’ve got that man chosen. We first thought we would center the attack on President Truman, but we decided he is too popular; but we’ve got a perfect devil in this man Ewing and we’re going to give him the works.⁵⁷

Oscar Ewing, the administrator of the Federal Security Agency, the organization that would administer a national health program, would be the devil. The attack wouldn’t be against Truman or his plan; instead, it would be against the evils of “socialized medicine” and the threat to American freedom. Leone Baxter wasn’t so kind: she called Ewing “the patent medicine man” for his “deliberate attempt to hide from the people the true cost and social consequences of the scheme of socialized medicine which he is proposing.”⁵⁸

“Socialized medicine” lived on and became a stock reply for those opposed to federal government intervention into medicine. It was an AMA theme against the creation of Medicare in 1965, and it was resurrected by opponents of President Obama’s first-term health-care legislation.⁵⁹

The AMA and Whitaker & Baxter swung into action. During the first several months after Truman announced his plan, the AMA poured out \$1.4 million for its grassroots lobbying and publicity effort. Later, in December 1949, in an unprecedented move, the AMA instituted a compulsory annual dues payment of \$25 per member to raise another \$3 million.⁶⁰ For its efforts, Whitaker & Baxter reportedly received \$350,000, and altogether during the three-and-a-half year period, some \$4.7 million was spent fighting the president’s plan. These were astounding, unprecedented numbers; no organization had ever spent so much money to defeat federal legislation.⁶¹

The Whitaker & Baxter team, now numbering thirty-seven, gathered endorsements from 8,000 nonmedical organizations—groups as diverse as the American Legion, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, fraternal organizations, business groups, and organizations large and small. They all pledged their resistance to national health insurance. Whitaker & Baxter distributed some 40 to 50 million pieces of literature to doctors' and dentists' offices, druggists, insurance agents, and others.

The campaign literature stressed "compulsory versus voluntary health insurance" or "Socialized Medicine versus The Voluntary Way." The message was not subtle. Here is an example of one of the AMA's releases:

Who is for Compulsory Health Insurance? The answer: The Federal Security Agency. The President. All who seriously believe in a Socialistic State. Every left-wing organization in America . . . The Communist Party.⁶²

One effective piece of campaign propaganda was a poster featuring a well-known painting by nineteenth-century artist Sir Luke Fildes, showing a kindly family doctor at the bedside of a sick child, while a worried father watches on. The poster's text read:

Keep Politics Out of This Picture!" . . . Would you change this picture? Compulsory health insurance is political medicine. It would bring a third party—a politician—between you and your Doctor. It would bind up your family's health in red tape. It would result in heavy payroll taxes—and inferior medical care for you and your family. Don't let that happen here.⁶³

Truman's health-care proposal, announced in his January 1949 State of the Union speech, was stopped cold by November. Whitaker & Baxter stayed on for the next two years to help the AMA fight against any similar proposals coming out of the White House or the Democrats in Congress. They were also instrumental in helping the AMA, doctors' groups, hospital staffs, insurance companies, and pharmaceutical representatives in opposing incumbent federal legislators who supported national health insurance. This three-year battle, the most expensive thus far waged by an interest group, made Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter wealthy, admired by fellow conservatives, and feared by progressive and liberal policymakers.

Other Campaigns

Between 1933 and 1955, Whitaker & Baxter managed seventy-five campaigns and won seventy of them: thirteen of those campaigns were for major public offices, a few were for minor offices, and the rest were ballot propositions.⁶⁴ The firm had several subsidiary operations: Campaigns, Inc. planned and executed the campaign, while Clem Whitaker Advertising Agency placed all the advertising

(and took the usual 15 percent agency fee), and their California Features Service provided news copy for some 700 newspapers throughout California.⁶⁵ Whitaker & Baxter candidate campaigns were “99 and 44/100ths percent” Republican campaigns, noted Clem Whitaker Jr.⁶⁶ The most important candidates, apart from Earl Warren for governor (1942), were Goodwin Knight (lieutenant governor, 1946; governor, 1954; governor and US senator in 1958) and presidential candidates Wendell L. Willkie (1940) and Thomas E. Dewey (1948). Earl Warren was Dewey’s running mate, but Whitaker & Baxter did not work for the Warren part of the ticket in 1948. The breach between Clem Whitaker and Warren had not healed. The firm also handled a portion of Richard Nixon’s 1960 presidential campaign. Whitaker & Baxter handled the presidential campaign of the Nixon-Lodge campaign in northern California, while Baus & Ross Campaigns handled southern California for the Republican ticket. Nixon won the state by just 36,000 votes, out of a record 6.6 million votes cast.⁶⁷

The firm also handled numerous state initiatives and worked for several corporate clients.⁶⁸ Clem Whitaker Jr. summed up the practice: “We ran issue campaigns that didn’t have too much of a partisan impact, some of them, and they were of a sufficient mix that we never got into the position where we were viewed as Standard Oil’s people or as Southern Pacific’s people. We were doing shipping campaigns and school campaigns and a whole variety of things that broke those barriers.”⁶⁹

After a 1958 falling out with their candidate Governor Goodwin Knight, Whitaker & Baxter became less of a factor in California politics. Whitaker sold his firm to his elder son, Clem Jr., and two associates, James Dorais and Newton Stearns, in 1958. The new owners assisted the Barry Goldwater for President campaign in California in 1964 and later helped former child movie star Shirley Temple Black in her unsuccessful bid for a congressional seat in 1967.⁷⁰ Clem Sr. and Leone then formed Whitaker & Baxter International, which branched out into national and international consulting for government relations. Three years later, in 1961, Clem Whitaker died and was survived by Leone Baxter, who died in 2001.

In summing up his career, Clem Whitaker was optimistic (or was it simply part of his advertising spin?) when he said, “We feel that people in our state are better informed, more alive to the issues, are better citizens because of our activities.”⁷¹

Other California Campaign Firms

Several other public relations firms emerged in California during the late 1940s and 1950s. The California Commission on Campaign Financing concluded that by the 1950s, there were perhaps “dozens” of firms in operation in California, many of which were created by former employees of Whitaker & Baxter.⁷² Harry Lerner, who had received his training with Whitaker & Baxter, set up shop in San Francisco. He successfully managed Edmund G. (Pat) Brown’s 1950 and 1954 campaigns for state attorney general.⁷³ In 1956 Lerner defeated his old colleagues

during an initiative measure to “unitize” California’s oil fields, thus limiting the production of oil in the state (Proposition 4).⁷⁴ Thomas S. Page and Robert Alderman, also protégés of Whitaker & Baxter, created separate campaign management businesses. Page worked primarily in city campaigns, particularly for Board of Supervisor races in San Francisco. Alderman had managed Lieutenant Governor Goodwin Knight’s re-election campaign in 1950, and several statewide and state legislative contests.⁷⁵ Other California campaign management firms included those of H. Harvey Hancock, D. V. Nicholson, and A. Ruric Todd.⁷⁶

The Los Angeles-based firm Baus & Ross Campaigns, headed by Herbert M. Baus (1914–1999) and William B. Ross (1915–2003), was created in 1948. Baus had been publicity director for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and Ross managed the public relations efforts of the Los Angeles Home Show. When a local proposition calling for the construction of public housing appeared on the ballot, they jointly worked on a campaign to stop the proposition. They were successful, and out of that experience came their business partnership.⁷⁷ For the next thirty-five years, Baus & Ross Campaigns served California clients, especially Richard Nixon and Pat Brown. From 1948 through 1980, Baus & Ross managed over 100 campaigns, winning over 90 percent of them.⁷⁸ The firm was a pioneer in the use of survey research and direct-mail persuasion.

Herbert Baus and William Ross made the case for having seasoned professionals handle campaigns:

Political campaigns are too important to leave to the politicians; too rich the prize, too complex and costly the process to entrust the struggle for political power entirely to party chieftains, political bosses, committee chairmen, hopeful candidates, ambitious insiders, and political ‘volunteers’ (paid or otherwise).

They are all necessary as grains of sand to the final mix, but they require the added cement of professional management pros steeled and battle-readied in the crucible of political combat.⁷⁹

Another campaign consultant was Murray Chotiner (1909–1974), a Los Angeles lawyer and political operative who ran several campaigns, but was most associated with Richard M. Nixon’s ascent in California and then national politics. He had been campaign manager for Earl Warren and William F. Knowland, and in 1946 he was campaign manager when Nixon first ran for Congress against five-term incumbent Jerry Voorhis. Historian Stephen Ambrose wrote that this initial Nixon campaign effort was “characterized by a vicious, snarling approach that was full of half-truths, full lies, and innuendoes, hurled at such a pace that Voorhis could never catch up with them.”⁸⁰

In 1950 Chotiner was Nixon’s campaign manager in the hard-fought, rough-and-tumble US Senate contest between Nixon and congresswoman and former Hollywood actress Helen Gahagan Douglas. Chotiner, a disciple of Clem Whitaker, was a difficult individual to like. Pat Nixon despised him and asked her husband to fire him, but Nixon decided that Chotiner’s “hard-line,

street-smart political advice was more important to him than his wife's objections."⁸¹ Nixon charged Douglas with being soft on communism, the "Pink Lady" who often voted the same way as leftist congressman Vito Marcantonio of New York, and who could not be trusted to stand up to the forces of evil in the US Senate. She was, Nixon charged, "pink right down to her underwear."⁸² Douglas, in turn, labeled Nixon "Tricky Dick," a label that would stick with him throughout his long, checkered career. Nixon was making a name for himself as a fierce anticommunist, committed to aggressively rooting out communist sympathizers. The liberal, sophisticated, but naïve Douglas fell right into the Nixon soft-on-communism, un-American-activities narrative and lost the election.

Chotiner was also a close adviser and campaign manager when Nixon was chosen by Dwight D. Eisenhower as his vice-presidential running mate in 1952. Nixon had been accused of taking money from a secret fund, created by political backers (see chapter 3). Chotiner advised Nixon to make public his side of the story. "Dick, all we've got to do is to get you before enough people talking about this fund, and we will win this election in a landslide," he said.⁸³ Nixon made a historic, half-hour speech, sponsored by the Republican National Committee, in which he defended his action and then attacked his opponents. This maudlin, self-serving speech, commonly called the "Checkers speech," was important to salvaging Nixon's place on the vice-presidential ballot.

At a May 1956 meeting of the Republican National Committee chairmen's campaign school in Washington, DC, Chotiner gave this hard-hitting advice: the first step toward attaining public office is to tear down your opponent before you start to run. "Like it or not," Chotiner explained, "the American people in many instances vote against a candidate, against a party, or against an issue, rather than for" candidates, parties or issues.⁸⁴ Political scientist Totton J. Anderson observed in 1959 that "the traditional Nixon-Chotiner formula for lineage-with-communism has practically become standard operating procedure for Republican campaigning in California."⁸⁵

Nixon and Chotiner parted ways during the mid-1950s, principally because of investigations into Chotiner's alleged influence peddling, but in 1962 he was back assisting Nixon in the California governor's race. The California Democratic state chairman, Eugene Wyman, accused Richard Nixon in 1962 of condoning the "dirtiest" gubernatorial campaign in recent memory.⁸⁶ The Nixon campaign again was run by Chotiner. At the heart of Wyman's complaints were two pamphlets containing faked photos of Governor Edmund G. (Pat) Brown Sr., who was running for re-election. One of the photos had been taken several years earlier, and the pamphlet showed Brown in a prayerful attitude, saying: "Premier Khrushchev, we who admire you, we who respect you, welcome you to California." The overline read: "Brown is a Red Appeaser." Chotiner denied any involvement in the pamphlets.⁸⁷

Brown was also attacked by a phony organization set up by none other than Whitaker & Baxter. The consultants employed an appeal that Nixon had used before: *Real* Democrats (that is, conservative Democrats) should be outraged at Brown, who sold out to the ultra-New Dealers and Kremlin-lovers. Voice your

opinion and send money to fight against Brown. A half-million Democrats were sent this mailer, at a cost of \$70,000, but it yielded just \$368.50 from outraged Democrats.⁸⁸

Murray Chotiner continued as an informal adviser to Nixon and became a member of the White House staff in 1969. He died in an automobile accident in early 1974, in the midst of the Watergate scandal.

Another firm, the Joseph Robinson Company, specialized in collecting signatures for qualifying petitions. Political scientist Stanley Kelley noted that from the 1930s through the mid-1950s, the Robinson Company had qualified over 90 percent of all propositions appearing on California ballots. The company charged between 15 and 20 cents per signature (in 2016 the rates were \$1.00 and up). On occasion, Robinson also provided his services for both sides of an issue.⁸⁹

In Washington DC, one of the important earlier campaigners was Joseph S. (Smiling Joe) Miller, who helped a number of prominent Democrat senators get elected to office, including Henry M. Jackson (Washington), Warren G. Magnuson (Washington), Wayne Morse (Oregon), Frank Church (Idaho), William Proxmire (Wisconsin), and Philip Hart (Michigan). In 1957, working for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Miller was a particularly hot property, having helped six Senate Democrats win office. The *Washington Post* called him the Democrats answer to the Madison Avenue Republicans.⁹⁰

Other advertising or public relations firms, both in California and in other states, worked in candidate or ballot-issue campaigns, but nearly all did so as a sideline to their main business for commercial clients. Writing about money and American politics in 1960, political scientist Alexander Heard surveyed public relations firms and “commercial politicians” that were involved in presidential and other US campaigns.⁹¹ Altogether, 130 firms stated that during the years 1952–1957 they had participated in 554 political campaigns at all levels; further, they claimed to have over-all responsibility for managing 183 campaigns. The services they provided included arranging advertising space in newspapers or airtime for radio or television (57 firms), speech writing and preparing publicity materials (66), fundraising (36), and overall management of the campaign (41).⁹² Those 41 campaign management firms were spread among fifteen states, but were mostly located in California, Texas, and New York. In addition to Heard’s survey, Whitaker & Baxter estimated that by the 1950s there were probably no more than 30 to 40 firms that had managed political campaigns.⁹³

CHAPTER 2

Measuring Public Opinion, 1930s–1960s

Polls go wrong, and that's all there is to it.

—Jim Farley (1938)

Public opinion . . . is the pulse of democracy.

—George Gallup (1940)

*No poll I have ever been witness to has made the candidate
a different man, has changed his position on an issue,
has made him into what he is not.*

—Louis Harris (1963)

WHAT DOES THE public want? What do voters believe? What do they think about our candidate, our opponent, or about the campaign? For much of the history of campaigning, that understanding of public opinion came through educated guesses, reading newspapers and political tracts, and listening to groups and individuals. But beginning in the 1930s, guesswork and political horse sense about what the public thinks had been supplanted by rudimentary survey research. Private polling consultants began their work in the 1930s, with President Franklin D. Roosevelt seeking out the public's attitudes on a variety of subjects. In the electoral arena, private polling was first used by John F. Kennedy as he prepared for the 1960 presidential election. Public polling, conducted by the media, had to overcome some serious and embarrassing mistakes during the 1936 and 1948 presidential elections, and for much of this time, candidates for office and officeholders were reluctant to rely on survey results, either from public sources like newspaper-commissioned studies or from private pollsters hired exclusively by the candidates or political parties.

From the earliest times in American politics, newspaper, organizations, and citizen groups conducted “straw polls” to gauge the opinions and

sentiments of the public. During the 1824 presidential election—that heated four-way contest between John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and William H. Crawford, which eventually had to be resolved in the House of Representatives—a variety of opinion surveys were taken, with people raising their hands or marking secret ballots at Fourth of July celebrations, tax gatherings, grand juries, military musters, and special political meetings.¹ The first known American newspaper poll was conducted that year by the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian*, asking citizens in Wilmington, Delaware, which presidential candidate they preferred. However, this kind of survey of public opinion, conducted throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while interesting and perhaps entertaining, was inherently flawed. Nineteenth-century critics of these polls, even without an understanding of statistical analysis and scientific survey methodologies, raised valid objections: the straw polls were not being accurately reported, the groups polled were dominated by supporters of one candidate, respondents were often ineligible to vote, those who voted were unrepresentative of the area, and tallies were inaccurate. As social scientist Tom W. Smith pointed out, the straw polls were “seriously flawed and unscientific.” Samples were haphazard with imperfect population targets, data collection was biased, and analysis of the data was too simplistic. Despite these flaws, the 1824 straw polls “did quite well” in their predictions.²

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, straw polls formed an integral part of the partisan debate, and candidates for office took notice. In 1859, Abraham Lincoln observed that “public opinion in this country is everything.”³ In the middle of the nineteenth century, campaigns were often raucous spectator sports. It was not unusual to have high voter turnout in presidential elections, even 70 to 80 percent of eligible men. Straw polls added to the excitement. Newspaper reporters interviewed citizens on trains, at rallies, or at other public gatherings, and citizens polled themselves and reported the results to newspapers.⁴

Straw polling, however, became serious business in 1896, in the presidential contest between former congressman William Jennings Bryan, a Democrat from Nebraska, and William McKinley, a Republican and former governor of Ohio. Many newspapers conducted straw polls, and some were quite accurate. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Record* canvassed voters in person or with postcard ballots, and the results closely mirrored the actual results in Chicago.⁵ During the first three decades of the twentieth century, presidential straw polls became commonplace among major newspapers, including the Hearst newspapers, the *New York Herald*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Cleveland Press*, and *St. Louis Times*.⁶ The most well-known nationwide preference poll was conducted by the popular magazine *Literary Digest*, and from 1920 through 1932 it was remarkably accurate in predicting the presidential outcomes.

The *Literary Digest*

Beginning in 1920, the *Literary Digest*, a national magazine with a large circulation, published a nationwide poll predicting the outcome of the presidential

election. Every four years, the *Literary Digest* polls predicted the results correctly, and the magazine congratulated itself over its “uncanny accuracy.” Indeed, its 1932 presidential poll (between incumbent Herbert C. Hoover and New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt) was just one percentage point away from the actual results. James Farley, chairman of the Democratic Party in 1932, was impressed: “Any sane person cannot escape the implication of such a gigantic sampling of popular opinion as is embraced in the *Literary Digest* straw vote. . . . It is a poll fairly and correctly conducted.”⁷ These presidential polls, along with the *Literary Digest* polls on other elections and other public policy issues, brought the magazine a great deal of credibility and increased readership. But all this came crashing down with the publication of its 1936 predictions, when the inherent flaws of the polling methodology led to an embarrassing miscalculation.⁸

In 1936 Roosevelt was running for re-election; his Republican opponent was Kansas governor Alf Landon, with North Dakota lawyer William Lemke, the candidate of Father Charles Coughlin’s Union Party, as a third-party opponent. In late summer, the *Literary Digest* sent out 10 million straw-vote ballots (it had sent out about twice that number in 1932), drawn from telephone listings and automobile registrations; 2.5 million ballots were returned. Four hundred clerks spent September and early October tabulating the results, which were then published shortly before the November election. The poll results were clear: Landon would handily beat Roosevelt, 55–41 percent, with Lemke receiving 4 percent.⁹

The actual vote showed quite the opposite: Roosevelt overwhelmed Landon, 61–37 percent, with Lemke receiving just 2 percent; Roosevelt won 523 electoral votes, and all but two states. It was the most lopsided presidential contest in modern history up to that point.¹⁰ The results crushed the reputation of the *Literary Digest*, which had been losing readers before 1936, and after the bungled poll changed ownership, it declared bankruptcy and folded. How could this happen? There were cries of foul: Had the *Literary Digest* been dishonest? Had its editors rigged the poll in favor of Landon? Was there some connivance to deny Roosevelt a second term? Pollster George H. Gallup, who in 1936 was just earning a national reputation, later remarked, “Disaster lay in the *Digest*’s cross section and its sampling methods, not in the morals of its organizers.”¹¹

In fact, Gallup challenged the *Literary Digest* poll even before it came out. In a July 1936 newspaper column, using a 3,000-person sample drawn from the same automobile registration and telephone lists used by the *Literary Digest*, Gallup forecast that, based on that sample, Landon would get 56 percent of the vote, and that result would be far off the true mark, not anywhere near the actual results. The *Literary Digest* editor, Wilfred J. Funk, shot back an indignant response in the *New York Times*: “I am beginning to wish that the esteemed Dr. Gallup would confine his political crystal-gazing to the offices of [Gallup’s own] American Institute of Public Opinion and leave our *Literary Digest* figures politely and completely alone.” Never before had anyone—particularly an upstart competitor—dared to say in advance that the *Literary Digest*’s methods of prediction might be wrong.¹²

Actually, others had criticized the methodology, but not so publicly. Long before the 1936 poll results, some academics and professional pollsters had warned that the straw poll methods were flawed. A study by a Columbia University sociologist showed that there were at least eight sources of potential error, including class bias in the *Literary Digest* poll.¹³

What then had gone wrong? First, there was a sampling problem: the addresses of the 10 million persons who received ballots from the magazine came from telephone numbers and automobile tags. The middle class and well-off (mostly Republicans) were overrepresented, and those who could not afford a telephone or an automobile (mostly Democrats) during the Depression years were underrepresented. Political scientist Peverill Squire notes, however, that even respondents who both owned an automobile and had a telephone were solidly for Roosevelt, and if all 10 million had returned the ballots, Roosevelt still would have been the predicted winner, albeit with a far smaller margin.¹⁴ Second, there was a nonresponse problem. The better educated and wealthier respondents (Republicans) were more eager to fill in the ballot and return them than were Roosevelt supporters.¹⁵

In early elections, the sampling and nonresponse problems were masked by the Republican victories in 1920, 1924, and 1928. With the 1932 election, there was a rare crossover of upper-income voters choosing Roosevelt over Hoover, and the sampling problems were not detected. But then came the 1936 fiasco, a black eye for the nascent survey research industry, and the demise of a popular magazine.¹⁶

Crossley, Gallup, and Roper

Survey research became a growing business after World War I. By 1932, there were at least eighty-five polling organizations, mostly regional or local, that were conducting public opinion surveys. The *Literary Digest* poll was the most well-known at the national level, but there were three other organizations, all coming out of a background in market research, that also were gauging the mood of the public nationwide.

The leading pollster of the day was Archibald M. Crossley (1896–1985), who entered the market research business in 1918, and created his own research firm, Crossley, Inc., in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1926. He had also developed the Crossley Radio Survey, which published the results of telephone interviews on the preferences of listeners in fifty cities. By the 1936 presidential election, Crossley was conducting polls for the Hearst newspapers; he relied on personal interviews, rather than mail-in questionnaires, for election forecasting. Crossley predicted a Roosevelt win in the 54–55 percent range, but the fiercely anti-Roosevelt Hearst papers muted (and downplayed) the results: “Roosevelt in Lead but Crossley Poll Finds Landon Victory Quite Possible” read one headline.¹⁷ But he wasn’t always right. As noted below, Crossley, along with Gallup and Roper, predicted wrongly that Thomas E. Dewey would defeat Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election. Crossley was a pioneer in developing psychological dimensions

for questionnaires, and he was particularly interested in the wording of survey questions and the intensity of answers.

The second prominent pollster was George H. Gallup Sr. (1901–1984). Gallup earned his BA, MA, and PhD degrees from the University of Iowa, then taught journalism at the University of Iowa, Drake University, and Northwestern University. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, he conducted research for the *Des Moines Register*, *Des Moines Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.¹⁸ In 1932, he joined the advertising agency of Young & Rubicam as head of marketing and director of research. Gallup's interest in public opinion and politics was partly inspired by the desire to assist his mother-in-law, Ola Babcock Miller, a Democrat, in winning an election (and then re-election) to the office of secretary of state in Iowa.¹⁹ Mrs. Miller may have been the first candidate for American elected office to benefit from private polling, which showed that, while being a Democrat, she nevertheless had a good chance of winning in that traditionally Republican state.²⁰

Gallup founded the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) in 1935 in Princeton, New Jersey. His first syndicated public opinion poll, "America Speaks" debuted on October 20, 1935, and was featured in at least twenty-five newspapers across the United States.²¹ Gallup was "creating newspaper content that would interest the common man, convince more of them to buy newspapers, lead interested readers to advertising, and thus please publishers."²² Each weekly segment of "America Speaks" presented one question, the poll results, and articles by the newspaper reporters. The inaugural question, asked during the depths of the Depression, was timely: "Do you think the expenditures by the government for relief and recovery are too little, too great, about right?"²³

Gallup predicted that Roosevelt would win in 1936 with 54 percent of the popular vote and 477 electoral votes (his actual win was 61 percent and 523 electoral votes). Yet Gallup also made some big errors in the 1936 election forecast: he was 28 points off in Arizona and 24 off in Minnesota, with a median error rate of 12 percent in the states where he was wrong.²⁴

The third competitor was Elmo Roper (1900–1971), who began his career in the family jewelry business in Iowa, but then pioneered in the fields of market research and public opinion analysis. From 1935 through 1970, he was director of the Fortune Survey, sponsored by *Fortune* magazine, the first nationwide poll based on sampling techniques. Roper's *Fortune* survey during the fourth quarter of 1936 wasn't a direct forecast, but it showed that Roosevelt was the "favorite," with 61.7 percent, less than a 1 percent deviation from the actual vote results.²⁵

Roper's surveys during the 1940 and 1944 presidential elections proved to be the most accurate of the three. During World War II, Roper was recruited by William (Wild Bill) Donovan to be deputy director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), charged with finding the best recruits for the new intelligence agency. Roper later became a "dollar-a-year" man for the Office of War Information, Office of Production Management, the Army, and the Navy, surveying the public on wartime issues and the transition to a peacetime economy. Just after World War II, with the cooperation of George Gallup, Roper established the

Roper Center at Williams College. Now housed at Cornell University, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research is the world's largest archive of public opinion surveys, representing the work of more than 150 polling firms in the United States.²⁶

Quota and Probability Sampling

Instead of surveying millions of people by using mail-in ballots (the method used by the *Literary Digest*), Crossley, Gallup, and Roper contacted just a few thousand voters who were identified and selected to represent the population as a whole.²⁷ They were interviewed in person, a time-consuming and expensive method, but one that proved to be far more accurate than the straw vote methods of prescientific polling.

George Gallup used the technique of quota sampling in his surveys. Census data were used to determine the population characteristics of those to be surveyed. The census data determined, for example, that x-number of men over fifty should be surveyed, along with y-number of women living in a defined geographic part of the state, z-number of women under thirty, and so forth. The choice of who should be questioned, however, would be left up to the interviewer. The key advantage of quota sampling was cost savings: interviewers would not have to go block to block, could interview the most convenient persons, and could avoid costly and time-consuming legwork. But there were drawbacks: the crucial element of randomness was lost when the interviewer selected the subject, resulting in over- or underrepresentation of particular groups of individuals. After the 1948 presidential election, the quota sampling method fell into disrepute.²⁸

It is generally agreed that while the theoretical roots of sampling theory extend back to the late nineteenth century, the first use of probability sampling came during the mid-1930s and was improved upon during the next two decades.²⁹ The sampling process identifies, selects, and then contacts individuals from a given population, using some form of random selection. The first large-scale use of probability sampling in the United States was undertaken by the federal government, through the Works Projects Administration in 1939, seeking to determine estimates on unemployment and the size of the labor force.³⁰

Both Crossley and Gallup conducted small surveys, using the techniques of probability and quota sampling, and correctly predicted the election outcome. These techniques, wrote Martin R. Frankel and Lester R. Frankel, “provided a clear repudiation of the generally accepted notion that quantity in the number of respondents provided the ultimate measure of data quality and accuracy.”³¹

The 1948 Presidential Polling Fiasco

In 1940, public polls performed better in predicting the outcome of the presidential campaign than they had in 1936.³² The Roper organization, with a staff of eighty-one trained interviewers, focused on attitudinal scales, which permit respondents to express gradations of opinion. Roper conducted its polls for the Fortune Survey, and its results of forecasting the popular vote were characterized as “amazingly accurate.” The American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup