Review
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LAZARSFELD, PAUL F., BERNARD BERELSON, and HAZEL GAUDET


Failure of the polls in the recent presidential race occasioned a rousing outburst of hosannas to the free and rational nature of man. Editors, columnists, and other citizens loudly proclaimed the triumph of man over measurement, of soul over science, of people over the pollers. “The American public simply refuses to be 'sampled,'” one reader wrote excitedly to the New York Herald-Tribune. Public opinion is “mysterious,” editorialized the Washington Star. “Unpredictable,” suggested Life. “A refusal of intelligent imagination to be stigmatized by pure science,” exclaimed the Austin American-Statesman.

This post-election demonstration probably represented a little scapegoating, and also a little frolicking at the expense of the redfaced pundits of Princeton and Rockefeller Plaza. But it almost certainly reflected as well a certain suspicion and hostility toward modern efforts to quantify and predict (and thus “restrict” and “mechanize”) human beings. Many Americans were doubtless cheered by the failure of the experts, and drew themselves up to full height as they faced the future free to choose their own destiny without constraint of past or present “determiners.” Against this backdrop of skepticism of social science the present book takes on its most valuable meaning. For, in systematic and objective fashion, the authors indicate that human beings—without being either machines or white rats—do behave consistently with a set of specifiable conditions. The People's Choice shows what can happen when apparently inscrutable behavior is analyzed in some detail, and when the rapt moment of decision is viewed in the light of disposing factors. Human thoughts and actions become no less complex, no less free or rational, because the scientist scrutinizes them and offers some generalizations; they become only, perhaps, a little less mysterious.

The current edition of this pioneering study of American voting behavior (1940 election) is more useful than ever, now that it can be read with perspective gained from two subsequent presidential campaigns. The style is fresh and readable, and the 40 or so bar charts tell their story with engaging clearness. A new 22-page preface by Lazarsfeld adds some interesting material and views. The People's Choice was eagerly received when first published, and its first edition has been out of print for some time. It is to be expected and hoped that this slender volume will be even more widely read in its second edition, especially by editors, government officials, businessmen and other opinion leaders who may look askance at human science in
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general because the commercialized polls miscalled the 1948 election. Wide use by colleges and universities is already assured. *The People's Choice* has achieved the rather rare status of a standard teaching aid in at least three academic disciplines: psychology, sociology, and political science.

The data were gathered by a group of social scientists who remained in Erie County, Ohio, from May until November, 1940, and observed the effects of the Roosevelt-Willkie campaign in that community. The study centered around a panel of 600 representative respondents who were questioned monthly for seven successive months. Some of the panel members did not change their political opinions during this period; others shifted and wavered in a variety of ways. These "changers" were compared with the "constants"; their personal characteristics were examined; their contacts with other people and exposure to radio and newspapers were observed; the reasons they gave for their changes were related to their objective social-economic positions; their opinions on earlier and later interviews were compared. *The People's Choice*, in short, is not an "opinion poll" report: it is the running story of attitude formation and change in the same people in a critical time of persuasion, pressure, and decision.

Many trends apparent in 1940 were confirmed in 1948. For example, Truman's razzle-dazzle face-to-face campaign probably reached and activated many Democratically-inclined but indifferent voters who exposed themselves little to radio and newspapers. Almost certainly, too, Democratic party workers played an important role in getting out the vote, while the Republicans rested on their anticipated laurels. The relative slowness of the Democrats to make up their minds was evident in 1948, as it was in earlier years.

A basic fact brought out in *The People's Choice* is that voters tend to make up their minds in line with certain group characteristics. As the authors point out: "There is a familiar adage in American folklore to the effect that a person is only what he thinks he is. . . . Now we find that the reverse of the adage is true: a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference." (p. 27) An Index of Political Preference, made up of religion, socio-economic level and residence, permitted a high degree of prediction as to how undecided people would, after weeks of deliberation, finally decide to vote! This and other findings, such as the tendency to seek out campaign propaganda congruent with latent predispositions, underscore the predictability of people in concrete situations if we know enough of the conditions that are functionally related to their behavior. The number of genuine doubters—people who open-mindedly attempt to weigh the issues and the candidates for the good of the country as a whole—were found to be very few indeed.

The authors have done a good deal to reveal the psychological variables present in voting behavior. In future studies, more analysis, more systematic in nature, should certainly be conducted at this subjective level. Purpose, perception, and meaning must be emphasized if we are to be prepared, for example, for shifts in voting behavior. Take well-to-do Middle Western farmers. They have traditionally voted Republican; yet in 1948 there is some evidence that many of them swung to
the Democrats. Why? Nothing in the Index of Political Preference, as such, prepares us for this change. We need to know what the farmers wanted and how the two parties were perceived in relation to this purpose. Again, we need to know (as the authors point out) why some people are interested in elections (and hence participate more), while others are indifferent. Do these latter citizens feel they have no stake in the campaign, or even in the community? It also seems certain, as the authors recognize, that more use should be made of "basic political attitudes," including class and interest group identifications, if we are to get the full, live story of individual voters.

Among other contributions of The People's Choice are a convincing demonstration of the panel technique in social research; an analysis of crosspressures (divided loyalties) in decision formation; the place of opinion leaders in the community; and the study of the content and influence of newspapers and radio in a presidential campaign. The book closes on a provocative note: "In the last analysis, more than anything else people can move other people. 'From an ethical point of view this is a hopeful aspect in the serious social problem of propaganda. The side which has the more enthusiastic supporters and which can mobilize grass-root support in an expert way has great chances of success." (p. 158)

Written in 1941, these lines seem to have a peculiar applicability to the election of 1948.

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Jacobson, David J.

Dame Rumor has indeed had many affairs and seduced men since time immemorial. With the appearance of Jacobson's The Affairs of Dame Rumor she has brought off another successful coup, this time in the canny guise of exposing and attacking herself. Jacobson's book is a crusading, muckraking frontal attack on the excrescence of rumor and man's gullibility. With striking consistency the book defeats its own purpose and serves as a case study in the very evils which it so gallantly set out to combat. In its pages we find profusely illustrated all those characteristics of human thought and belief which have indeed made rumor one of the most challenging problems for the social scientists and a perpetual source of discomfort in the body politic.

The phenomena of rumor highlight a fundamental psychological truth: man's perceptions, memories, thoughts and beliefs are often deeply embedded in his motivational life; the ways in which he knows his world are profoundly influenced by his needs, interests, attitudes and expectations. Surely the student of rumor should be amply forewarned against fighting emotion with emotion, anger with anger, fire with fire. Yet, if there is one feature which more than any other characterizes Jacobson's book, it is its sustained level of tense emotionality. An endless series of rumors is continuously intertwined with indignant tirades. Such phrases as "pernicious and culpable mass stupidity" stud the pages of the book. We can convey the atmosphere of