

# FOREWORD

*by Lloyd N. Morrisett*



The topic of political education is not often formally addressed in the United States. Civics, history, and social studies courses are thought to provide some orientation to political education. But it is assumed that an educated voter will result from a combination of family training, school experience, and participation in the political process. Although educators have paid comparatively little attention to the media, it is abundantly clear that the media have come to play an ever more important part in the political education of our citizenry and in our country's decision-making processes.

Network and local television, paid ads, newspaper and magazine coverage, and radio all go together to provide political education and information. Even though the goals of an individual media outlet may be a "show," news coverage, or editorial comment, the social objective of the aggregate coverage provided by the media is to enable the voter to be informed and to participate effectively in the political process. There is no coordination, no guiding hand, but we expect that an informed and educated voter will result from the "system."

From the point of view of society, it is not hard to outline the "curriculum" of political education that should be provided by the media. In a presidential year, the theme is how voters can best think about electing a president. What should they know? What does history have to teach? What are the issues? Who are the candidates? What are the requirements of the presidency and the qualifications of the candidates? Although these educational objectives may seldom be specifically addressed, the unstated assumption of the electorate is that the media will provide effective political education.

The experience of recent presidential elections has produced an increasing amount of criticism about the way candidates are chosen and elected. Several failed presidencies—the election of men whose experience or character led them to commit fatal errors during their presidencies—and a loss of certainty about America's mission in the world have all gone together to focus attention on the way our presidents are chosen. Much dissatisfaction has been expressed about the typical “horse-race” perspective provided by the media. Many observers have called for more and better coverage of the requirements for the presidency and the qualifications of candidates.

The 1988 election seemed to promise new opportunities. First, no incumbent president was seeking election, and the process was likely to be more fluid as a result. Second, new media outlets—particularly cable television—seemed to offer opportunities for new and/or extended presentations during a presidential election year. Third, many people were questioning the way candidates were chosen, and attention was again focused on the “apathy” of the typical American voter. This was the background that led to the formation of the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate. Its purpose was to examine objectively the information that was made available to the voters in the presidential campaign and how the voters used that information. Members of the commission were Robert O'Neil, former president of the University of Virginia and now director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression, who served as chairman; James David Barber, professor of political science at Duke University; John Culver, former senator from Iowa, now partner in Arent, Fox, Kintner, Plotkin & Kahn; Joan Konner, dean of the Columbia School of Journalism; Charles Mathias, former senator from Maryland and now partner in Jones, Day, Reavis & Pogue; Eugene Patterson, former publisher of the *St. Petersburg Times*; and Eddie Williams, president of the Joint Center for Political Studies. Bruce Buchanan, associate professor of political science at the University of Texas, was executive director of the project and planned and supervised the research that supported the commission's work. This book by Professor Buchanan reports the results of that research as well as the commission's recommendations, which have been previously issued.

Concentrating on the formal campaign period between Labor Day and election day, the commission believed it necessary to find out what voters knew at the beginning of the campaign, how much they learned, what information was provided by the media, and how the voters used that information provided by the media. Two national surveys, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, allowed the

commission to determine what the voters knew at the beginning of the campaign and how much they learned during the campaign. Content analysis of the campaign news presented by major newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks allowed the commission to appraise the quality of information provided. Sixteen focus groups conducted throughout the country during the same period enabled the commission to examine how people were using the media and what their individual concerns were. In this book, Professor Buchanan discusses the theoretical framework in which this research was conducted, and the research results are reported and analyzed. The book concludes with the commission's recommendations, which were arrived at by considering both the research and American political experience. The overriding conclusion of this work is that the democratic faith in government by the people cannot be taken for granted. Voters must take renewed responsibility for educating themselves. The media must better inform voters and protect them from misrepresentation, and the candidates must shoulder the responsibilities to enlighten and inspire.

On behalf of the Markle Foundation, I want to thank all the members of the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate and especially its chairman, Robert O'Neil, and its executive director, Bruce Buchanan, for what they have accomplished. The extensive research conducted by the commission provides clear evidence of shortcomings in our electoral processes. The recommendations that follow begin to show ways in which voters, the media, and candidates can all work together to make government by the people even more of a reality.

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AUGUST 1990

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