

INTRODUCTION

by Robert M. O'Neil



Electing a President offers a singular contribution to our understanding of what actually makes up a presidential campaign. The questions with which it begins are familiar ones to those who watch the electoral process. Yet the answers have been curiously elusive, despite the increasing sophistication of technology and political analysis, and the heightened media scrutiny which presidential elections evoke. Support of the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, through the Commission on the Media and the Electorate, made possible a comprehensive research program to seek those answers.

The research described here proceeded along three parallel lines. Key to understanding voter perceptions and views were the two polls conducted at critical points during the campaign. In addition to the familiar questions that test voters' knowledge about the candidates, the issues, and the relationship between issues and candidates, these surveys also asked some unique questions about media coverage—what media the respondents read, watched, and heard, where they got their campaign information, how fairly they thought the media handled key issues. It was these findings, and the fascinating contrasts between the September and October polls, that charted the changing fortunes of Bush and Dukakis in the weeks before the election.

A second ingredient was the focus groups. Representative citizens in four communities were invited to talk about the election, the candidates, and the issues, and did so with remarkable enthusiasm and candor. They also provided valuable insight into the role of the media in covering the election—though more impressionistically than systematically. Apart from the immediate yield of the focus

groups, this part of the research program suggests the utility of such sessions in future studies of elections and campaigns.

Content analysis of media coverage provided the third research component. A painstaking study of time and space actually allocated during the campaign confirmed a hunch that "the horse race" gets more attention than the personalities of the contenders, much less the issues on which they contend. But the content analysis revealed much more about sources of voter information and the extent and nature of presidential campaign coverage.

Since Professor Buchanan was the architect of the commission's research program, he is of course the ideal person to analyze and interpret the results. He brought to the study a rare understanding of presidential politics and campaign realities, along with a highly sophisticated sense of research design and methodology.

The contributions of this research program to the work of the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate have been legion. At the most basic level, the research findings helped to redirect our focus from media coverage to voter and citizen behavior. While we remained deeply concerned about the role of the media in reporting presidential campaigns, we came increasingly to appreciate the responsibility that citizens bear for their own participation in the political process. It was the research findings, quite as much as the experience of the campaign, that shifted our emphasis in this way.

The research program should also have significant bearing on analysis of future elections. Many of the questions that urgently needed to be answered in 1988 have been answered in ways that will make much easier and more rational studies of campaigning and voter response in 1992 and beyond. Any future research can and should built on the firm base that emerges from the data described in this study. To that extent, as in others, 1988 marks a watershed in presidential campaigns.

Appreciation is surely due to Lloyd Morrisett and Edith Bjornson of the Markle Foundation, not only for their support of the studies and the report, but for their deeply personal commitment of time, insights, and counsel throughout the process. Other members of the commission contributed either to the design or the interpretation of the research, or to both. But it is Bruce Buchanan who guided the commission through every stage of this complex process. It was an invaluable learning experience for us all—as it is certain to be for readers of this volume.

ELECTING A PRESIDENT

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