

B. AUBREY FISHER MEMORIAL **20**
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“What Does Voting Mean?”

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Introduction

Let's begin tonight with a scenario. Imagine that a reporter from the *New York Times* has just called. He wants *your take* on the 2016 presidential campaign. Please take a moment to consider your response. Was it quoted? Research suggests several factors that increase the likelihood your statement would make the news. If your statement was short, it might make the cut. If your statement was accessible, it might also be included. If your statement featured a sense of conflict, of certainty or prediction, of elite power, and—perhaps—even a hint of nega-

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tivity, all of those message properties, too, increase the likelihood that your statement would break into campaign coverage. But why are we starting a talk on voters with sound bites?

Because I'm going to get right to the point. With my colleague Dr. Soo-Hye Han, and a small army of graduate and undergraduate research teams at the University of Texas, I've been studying the public conversation surrounding voters for almost a decade. I'm going to tip my hand at the beginning of the talk and preview the three key points of tonight's lecture.

First, since 1972, the reification of strategists and punditry has sidelined voters in election coverage. Second, voters have become the collateral damage of a battle between journalists and strategists to control the campaign narrative. Third, it hasn't always been this way. And, it doesn't have to be in the future.

Tonight I'd like to share some context on the public conversation about voting that helped to shape my research. These themes include how:

- Voting is a key, and contested, symbol in the United States.
- Voters have few natural advocates.
- Voters are challenging for journalists to cover.

Then, I'd like to address some findings from my original research, including how:

- Voters have become an inconvenient part of the campaign narrative.
- Voters notice and react to how they are portrayed.
- The conversation surrounding voting needs our help.

Voting Is a Key, Contested Symbol

Let us begin with a fundamental, but often overlooked, reality in American life: voting is a key, and yet contested, symbol in the United States. At first blush, it would seem that the ballot holds an "honored place" in democratic ideology.

Upon closer examination, however, political scholars have expressed varying degrees of support for it.

Indeed, there are at least three schools of thought surrounding the role and influence of voting in a polity.

First, consider the statements by those who have praised electoral participation. Scholars in this camp have expressed how elections are the great public ceremonies of American life and the most important public referents of democracy. For democratic observers, these events have been applauded for how they reveal important histori-

cal data about political cultures, expose power relations, and unmask the qualitative nature of the experience of self-rule. For citizens participating in them, elections have been credited with more tangible benefits, including preventing tyranny,

confirming authority, selecting and empowering representatives, allowing the will of the people to be articulated, preventing selfish interests

from using the government to exploit others, promoting the growth of human potential, and fostering the development of viable communities.

Scholars in this group have also praised the political and symbolic aspects of casting a ballot. They have proclaimed that the vote is the most important activity in the political engagement domain, the primary check on elite greed, and the most critical of political decisions in the United States. They have also argued that the vote is the most basic symbol of democracy, the most fundamental of democratic rights, and the quintessential symbol of community membership. These researchers maintain that the right to vote often results from a long and sometimes violent fight and should be viewed as "one of the ultimate prizes in the struggle for freedom from tyranny, oppression, and autocracy." As Katz explains, "no country allows all adults to vote, and examination of the expansion of the right of suffrage provides a useful vehicle for understanding the restrictions that remain."

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A second group of researchers has been more critical of electoral participation.

Some authors in this cohort have critiqued voters for having low levels of political information and for more closely resembling manipulated subjects than educated, autonomous actors. Some place a sharper point on this concern, warning that an "excess of democracy" can override the ability of those with more "expertise, seniority, experience, and special talents" to make informed decisions for a polity. Still others have insisted that "people should not vote expecting to change outcomes,

certainly not in national elections in a democracy the size of the United States” because “citizens would be better off playing the lottery and using their winnings (if any) to influence the political process.”

A third set of political scientists acknowledge the limitations of electoral participation but insists that it, nevertheless, merits respect. For instance, writing in the 1960s, V.O. Key cautioned against promoting a perspective that mocked voters, arguing that the perceptions political elites hold of the electorate form the “input” to an “echo chamber” that invariably can “determine the nature of the voice of the people.” The practice of holding voters in low regard, he feared, could influence how elites approach governance, shape how they appeal to citizens, and influence the public’s understanding of its power in the system. Building on Key’s perspective, and also in the 1960s, Gerald Pomper believed “if elections are widely considered dangerous or meaningless, actions may follow to restrict their importance and to minimize the power of ordinary citizens.” After the contested 2000 presidential election, Ann Crigler and colleagues offered another reason to respect voters, suggesting that the very *participatory nature* of American democracy may promote stability. They suggested “maybe we have avoided political chaos because of participation” for “when people are hopeful and feel engaged and participatory in a society they are less, not more, likely to be insurrectionary” as “the greatest periods of unrest in our nation’s history have come when people or groups have felt disempowered, disrespected, and disenfranchised.” A conclusion shared by this group is that even if they are imperfect, elections serve as a precondition for political stability and as a mechanism for safeguarding the rights of citizens against political elites.

Voters Have Few Natural Advocates

Let us move to another fundamental, but

often overlooked, reality in American life: voters have few natural advocates in the United States. Perhaps previewed by the contested nature of the symbol, it is intriguing to note the actors in American life who are deeply ambivalent about electoral participation.

First, consider the Founders. They were uneasy with the notion of suffrage and carefully crafted our foundational documents accordingly.

They refused to place an affirmative right to vote in our Constitution—an act that many subsequent democratic countries endorsed. Indeed,

twenty-some countries, ranging from Argentina, Australia, and Brazil, have systems that enforce compulsory voting (and these systems are enforced in a variety of ways). In commenting on American ambivalence about electoral participation, Walter Dean Burnham observes, “In all other advanced capitalist democracies, it has for generations been a first principle that the right to vote is a fundamental human and political right and that it is the duty of the state to protect and facilitate its exercise.” His research points to the number of countries where voters are automatically registered to vote when they reach voting age.

Next, take elected officials. They, too, have been reluctant to protect or expand voting rights in a linear way. The history of American suffrage, Alexander Keyssar observes, is one of enacting

barriers to vote, amending the Constitution to prevent discriminatory acts, and then reinserting barriers to participate in elections. It is important

to note that these actions have been taken by both political parties over the years, often when they have comfortable majority party status. On this point, Keyssar maintains, the appearance, disappearance, and re-appearance of barriers to electoral participation are difficult to appreciate “in real time” as these political moves are naturalized by favored political elites.

Political candidates, too, have not always advocated for voters. Their support has been cycli-

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cal and tied to political culture. My work with my research team has captured a distinct trend over the second half of the twentieth century: presidential candidates are increasingly running for election while running against voters. Let's examine these two statements, both offered by Republican candidates. In 1956, Dwight Eisenhower treated voting as an honored value:

We must see, as we do our civic duty, that not only do we *vote* but that everybody is qualified to vote, that everybody registers, and everybody goes to the polls in November. Here is a task not only for the Republican National Committee, for the women's organizations, for the citizens' organizations, for the so-called Youth for Eisenhower—every body that bears this message in his heart must carry it to the country. In that way we will win (Eisenhower, 1956).

In 2012, Romney treated voting as a harmful choice:

But tonight I'd ask a simple question: If you felt that excitement when you *voted* for Barack Obama, shouldn't you feel that way now that he's President Obama? You know there's something wrong with the kind of job he's done as president when the best feeling you had was the day you voted for him (Romney, 2012).

Pedagogically, our nation's schools have also been reluctant advocates for voting. Civic education has changed significantly in the United States since the 1950s. At that time, students took courses in "civic problems" and learned practical civic skills (such as how to vote) in their high school classrooms. As the nation became more disenchanted with political life during the 1960s and 1970s, such grounded and practical instruction disappeared. Instead, civic education became more scientized (influenced by a spirit of government as a social science, by a sense of modernist

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...young Americans know less about their government than their parents or grandparents did at their age.

detachment, and by a spirit of objectivity), more scientized (influenced by the mass adoption of textbooks, by the complications of a civil rights movement, and by political conflict), and more nationalized (emphasizing the federal government, national institutions, and governmental processes).

These emphases have not created a more knowledgeable youth cohort. Despite an increased emphasis on information in public schools, and despite an increasingly educated citizenry, young Americans know less about their government than their parents or grandparents did at their age. Additionally, young Americans are less likely to be engaged in their communities, to participate in electoral politics, to read about their communities in local or national newspapers, to voice faith in their system, or to express healthy levels of political efficacy. So as schools emphasize scientized, sanitized, and national level political information, students are less engaged, less connected, and less likely to participate.

Voters are Challenging for Journalists to Cover

Let us move to yet another fundamental reality in American life: voters are challenging for journalists to cover. In introducing this point, allow me to touch on some, shall we call them "complicated moments," in campaign reporting. On November 2, 1948, more than 47 million Americans voted in their country's 41st quadrennial presidential election. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* could not wait for these votes to be tallied, however, before naming Republican Thomas Dewey the winner. Facing deadline pressures, and convinced by pre-election polling numbers, veteran reporter and political analyst Arthur Sears Henning called the election for this Chicago paper before the polls had even closed on the East Coast. Consequently, the next day's print edition featured the infamous—and incorrect—headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman." When the votes were actually counted,

Democrat Harry Truman received 2,188,055 more than Dewey (giving him an Electoral College edge of 303 to Dewey's 198). While this incident is renowned for several reasons—Truman's victory surprised the campaign and media elite; Henning's forecast put the practice of public opinion polling in question; and A.P. photographer Byron Rollins' iconic photo of a victorious Truman holding an early edition of the faulty front-page became seared into the public memory—tonight we are concerned with a more fundamental element of the event. What led an esteemed journalist to write the conclusion to the campaign narrative before the election was even over?

As it turns out, Henning's rush to conclude a presidential campaign news narrative has not been unique. A review of Election Night reporting practices reveals a set of similarly hurried efforts to record history before it has happened. In 1964, for instance, even though more than 70 million Americans voted in the presidential election, news stations on the East Coast began discussing Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson's lead in the race well before polls had closed on the West Coast. While Johnson did go on to win 61 percent of the popular vote (carrying all but six states), media outlets talked openly about his likely victory hours before all votes were cast.

In 1980, even though more than 86 million Americans voted in the presidential election, NBC called it for Republican Ronald Reagan at 8:15 p.m. EST. This action led incumbent President Jimmy Carter to deliver his concession speech 90 minutes later—*well before* the polls had closed in Western States.

And, in 2000, even though more than 6 million Floridians voted in the presidential election, Democrat Al Gore was declared the winner of the state at 7:49 p.m. by NBC/MSNBC, at 7:50 p.m. by CBS, at 7:52 p.m. by FOX and the Voter News Service, and at 8:02 p.m. by ABC; calls that were retracted by CBS at 10:00 p.m. and by the Voter News Service at

10:16 p.m. Republican George W. Bush was then named the winner in Florida by FOX at 2:16 a.m. and by ABC at 2:20 a.m., only for this pronouncement also to be retracted (by CBS at 3:57 a.m., ABC at 4:00 a.m., NBC/MSNBC at 4:02 a.m., and FOX at 4:05 a.m.). It would take more than a month for the courts to settle on the winner of the election in Florida in that year.

What led an esteemed journalist to write the conclusion to the campaign narrative before the election was even over?

America has witnessed considerable political, cultural, and technological changes in the 54-year span between the

famed Dewey headline and the Florida fiasco. A troubling constant over these years, however, can be witnessed in journalists' instinct to call elections before many votes have been counted. In each of these contests, millions of citizens turned out to perform their democratic duty of selecting the next president. And, in each of these cases, the media would not wait for their decisions to be counted before naming a winner.

Important projects have studied the problems of calling elections prematurely, and most have assessed if calling an election early affects voter turnout. Such analyses have revealed how (1) in 1964, "the number of vote *changes* among voters who heard election returns before voting was not very large," and (2) in 1980, no evidence was found to "support the belief that early projections significantly depressed voter turnout."

While these findings offer understandings of the effects of rushed calls on two lopsided contests (Johnson and Reagan won by wide margins in those years), Kurt and Gladys Lang warn of the broader concerns ignored by such studies.

They believed that "a failure to locate a significant number of vote changes in 1964 *does not mean* that more such changes cannot occur under different circumstances." Because "no two elections are exactly alike" they continue, the "matter of regulating the dissemination of returns on Election Day should be debated less in terms of the number of voters affected than in terms of the impact on the legitimacy of the electoral process." The Lang's well

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stated caution, and my role at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life—a research institute geared to create more voters and better citizens—piqued my curiosity about the public conversation surrounding voters and what it might say about the legitimacy of the electoral process.

How Has Electoral Participation Been Portrayed?

The research that I will now present embraces a broad, historical assessment of how electoral participation has been portrayed in print news coverage of presidential elections, focusing on reports written after the nominees have been selected at their party conventions in late summer until Election Day, 1948-2012.

Specifically, this research attends to how three key labels—vote, voter, and voting—have appeared in six newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Atlanta Constitution*) during a time period that reflects (1) higher and lower rates of voter turnout, (2) supportive and more skeptical news reporting styles, and (3) shifting levels of political engagement and trust. My research is driven by three fundamental concerns: How has electoral participation been portrayed in print news coverage of presidential elections (1948-2012)? How do people react to these portrayals? How do print news journalists make sense of these portrayals and their effects?

As we'll discuss tonight, I answered these questions through a mixed method project. The goal is to investigate the public conversation about the setting of American elections, including: What roles have voters played? Are they competent and helpful? Are they duped by elites and harmful? What has voting meant? Is it a process whereby citizens can safeguard democracy? Is it a waste of time? What is the power of the vote? Is it a right that merits protection? Is it a choice between competing elites?

What roles have voters played? Are they competent and helpful? Are they duped by elites and harmful?

Political key words do not come with instructions, and they point to a society's deepest values.

Four Assumptions

I base the importance of these efforts on four assumptions about language, news coverage, and political life. First, citizens come to know their places in a democracy through language, and the uses of the key words of electoral participation provide important cues to how individuals come to understand the health and legitimacy of their political system, as well as their places in it (even, and especially, when it is easy to take ordinary terms like vote, voter, and voting for granted).

As I have written elsewhere, a system's key words introduce people to their political environments, can change with time (both picking up and dropping cultural and political meanings), and can serve as powerful shortcuts in how individuals understand their worlds. Political key words do not come with instructions, and they point to a society's deepest values. These labels shift when culture shifts, and many scholars contend that it is politics, not linguistics, that cause words to change. Harold Lasswell observed how "one obvious function performed by political language is that of providing a common experience for everyone in the state, ranging from the most powerful boss to the humblest layman or philosopher. Indeed, one of the few experiences that bind human beings together, irrespective of race,

region, occupation, party or religion, is exposure to the same set of key words. Sentiments of loyalty cluster around these terms and contribute to the unity of the commonwealth."

Because basic political labels—like *vote*, *voter*, and *voting*—influence how people make sense of their political system, I pay close attention to how the terms of electoral participation have been portrayed in print news coverage of elections.

A second assumption is that elite voices, like those found in the nation's most read and most respected newspapers, help to manage the uses of the key words of electoral participation. As important as they are, democratic key words do not

control themselves. Research shows that citizen discourse is led, but not fully determined, by elite discourse. Journalists, many argue, play a critical role in managing the key words of a nation, for as Kathleen Hall Jamieson puts it, they “help mold public understanding and opinion by deciding what is important and what may be ignored, what is subject to debate and what is beyond question, and what is true and what is false.” Because the language in news reports helps to “shape the public definition of happenings by selectively attributing to them specific details or ‘particulars,’” I pay special attention to how elite journalists tell the story of electoral participation in their news reports.

A third assumption is that electoral contexts can promote electoral participation (by providing cues that voting is valued) as well as discourage such participation (by emphasizing cynical perspectives, low levels of external efficacy, and messages implying that voting is not valued). Certain contexts and messages have been shown to increase voter motivation and turnout. While it was long thought that mobilization messages should emphasize low rates of voting—and guilt citizens into action—recent experiments reveal that such claims may actually depress participation. Specifically, social norm studies show that individuals’ intentions to vote in a given election are directly affected by their perceptions of whether others are going to do so. That is, hearing that more people are voting (a descriptive social norm) as well as learning that other people value voting (an injunctive social norm) increase the likelihood that individuals want to vote themselves. Gerber and Rogers have applied this finding to the media, asserting that news coverage can either call attention to robust levels of voting and encourage individuals to regard such activities as important or it can undermine turnout by focusing on low rates of political participation. For this reason, I will focus on the electoral contexts in which the key words *vote*, *voter* and *voting* appear in the news.

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My fourth assumption is that meaningful efforts to study news portrayals that might create opportunities for democratic life should work with—and not simply critique—journalists’ perspectives and the daily practices of news rooms. “Journalists *make* the news,” writes Michael Schudson, “but they do not make it up.” Too often, he worries, academics condemn coverage they do not like without considering the actual events, pressures, and routines that lead to such reporting. In this research, I follow works that have integrated the voices of academics and practitioners by acknowledging the norms that lead to news selection (as in the introduction to this talk), and by drawing heavily on more than 40 in-depth interviews with journalists. The goals here are to work with journalists to identify, and promote when possible, prospects for meaningful coverage of voters rather than to simply judge coverage from a distance.

Voters as Duped, Naïve Pawns

Overall, when the content analytic data from 1948-2012 are examined *en masse*, voters are more likely to be portrayed as duped or naïve than competent, more often described as part of the problem than as part of a solution in American life, regularly cast as pawns of ambitious candidates and self-serving political strategists, and newsworthy when journalists questioned the integrity of the electoral system (e.g., the 2004 election). When the data are examined by election year, notable trends within these macro findings emerge. From 1948-1968 and in 2008, voters were portrayed as engaged, as mobilized by political parties and individual candidates, and as essential to electoral outcomes in the press.

Examples of this type of coverage can be found in these snippets from 1952 and 2008: The President (Truman) expressed the hope that everyone who is eligible to vote will do so tomorrow and “vote in the interest and welfare of the free nations of

the world, of the great country of which they are a part, and in their own interest.” He said their interests are at stake because “it means prosperity at home and peace in the world.” “If they vote their sentiments, as I think they are going to vote, the country will be safe for another four years.” (“Truman Urges,” 1952).

Campaign volunteers were encouraging people to vote absentee or early to avoid problems. Some supporters were even arranging with as many as a dozen friends to drive older, poorer or disabled Democrats to the polls on Election Day. It is exactly the kind of thing that Florida Republicans have used to get out the vote and win (Cave, 2008).

Then, from 1972-2000 and again in 2012, voters were portrayed as subsumed under public opinion polls and as pawns of political handlers and strategists. These types of portrayals are familiar to us today. Observe these examples from 1984 and 2012:

Mr. Wirthlin predicted, based on his polls, that Mr. Reagan would get 59 percent of the national popular vote, plus or minus two points (“G.O.P. Seeks,” 1984).

Rove also created a stir two days later when he accused Obama’s campaign of “suppressing the vote” (“Karl Rove and his Super PAC,” 2012).

Then, the coverage in 2004 broke from these patterns as, following the contested 2000 election, voters were portrayed as captives of a flawed voting system:

Between 1.5 and 3 million Americans may not have been able to vote in 2000 because of registration problems, a U.S. Census survey estimated. The number of voters turned away in Georgia in 2000 has never been determined. But Cox said she knows of a situation

in which some Atlanta University Center students were denied their vote because a power outage had kept their names from being properly entered into the computer database. (Campos, 2004).

The difference in engagement and agency found in the portrayals from 1948-1968 and 2008 versus the detachment and lack of agency in 1972-2000 and 2012 got us thinking about how people might react to these portrayals. Again, working with my colleague Dr. Soo-Hye Han, I ran a set of online experiments to see how adults across the country would react to the engaged portrayal versus the pawn of strategist portrayal. We hired a journalist with 25 years of experience working for the Associated Press to craft articles that matched the message properties of the engaged and pawn portrayal (as well as a third control condition). We randomly assigned participants to read these articles and asked them to complete closed ended and open ended items.

In analyzing the closed ended items, we learned how stories that portray voters as pawns of strategists increase cynicism and frustration with the media, stories that portray voters as engaged increase people’s stake in elections, and stories that portray voters as engaged also increase people’s faith in the media. We also saw how women and young voters (18-29) are particularly likely to respond to engaged portrayals. In analyzing the open ended items, we learned that participants echoed the language properties of the articles they read. Consider these open-ended responses to the Engaged Portrayal:

“I believe it is everyone’s duty to become involved in the politics of this country. Those who don’t vote will have no other voice in politics.”

“This article explained the political process well.”

“I found it easy to read and understand

...voters were portrayed as captives of a flawed voting system.

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and appreciated not being subjected to heated comments, snide remarks, or anything else that generally ‘raises the dander.’”

Now, observe the open-ended responses to the Pawn Portrayal:

“Polls are crap.”

...Journalists are surprised to have sidelined voters so steadily.

“There are certain facts about polls and what not, but the fact remains that no one can tell the future...unfortunately, this is typical of the media nowadays.”

“My overwhelming feeling was one of disappointment that the mainstream media can’t seem to give us any real information...ENOUGH of the horserace aspects already.”

Antagonism Toward Media

The antagonism toward the media in the pawn of strategist portrayal surprised us. Many of my colleagues in our School of Journalism at the University of Texas are former reporters, and several of them worked for the papers in our sample. As I discussed these findings with them, and got their insights on the project, I saw the value in talking to as many journalists writing for the papers examined as I could. I was conducted more than 40 elite interviews with these professionals to get their insights on the differences between the portrayals in our content analysis and the results of our experiments.

I’ll share a few of those themes with you. First, Journalists are surprised to have sidelined voters so steadily. They said such things as:

“Really?” “Huh?” “How?” “Wow.”

“This is surprising. My experience as a reporter is that the voters are always at the forefront. I would think newspapers talk about voters all of the time. We are always looking at voters, at trends, at demographics.”

“Why haven’t I heard about this? It never occurred to me that voters would care. I would

have thought that audiences were impervious to all of this. There are voters out there who care about what reporters say. Who knew?”

“No wonder no one likes us anymore. We treat them like they don’t matter. Turns out it is true. We’ve ignored voters since 1968. We have been very condescending.”

Second, Journalists fear that political strategists have hijacked the campaign news narrative (and reporters blame strategists for many of the problems with today’s political coverage).

“You know most people in the media aren’t journalists. They are paid hacks with a position to push. Peggy Noonan? Karl Rove? Both are writing for the *Wall Street Journal*. They are not journalists. They are commentators. Too few in the media today have covered a car accident. Have had to be fair minded. Know from bitter experience how to be fair. Have ever had to do research. Have ever had to know a story. So many in the commentariat have an agenda. They take the voters out of it. They already have the answer. Why should a voter be involved? (The strategists’) coverage has everything to do with their spin and nothing to do with voters or why people should vote.”

Other journalists expounded:

“Oh yes, handlers. They have money. Most have a background in journalism. And now they have more power than a journalist. They have more power! It is an ugly thing to say, but most of us go into journalism for the power. Now the strategists have the power. They have more power than the journalists. The strategists are the ones who are telling the stories. They have the money, the spin, they get to tell the public what to think, they have more and more control. This perplexes journalists.”

“Journalists are supposed to have the power and we have to play it straight. The strategists and

commentators, they get to spin off. And the power of phrase. They get to say what they want, and phrase it so elegantly. Doesn't even matter if it is true. Journalists probably want to keep up with commentators. We want the power back. We want to be the ones who are elegant."

Additional themes include how journalists (1) acknowledge that a sense of patriotism (1952-1968) and a good candidate (2008) could lead to better coverage for voters, (2) express a normative connection to the public, and (3) had ideas for how internal (story level) and external (pressure from voter advocates) factors could pressure them to write engaged voter portrayals.

Pressuring Journalists

For our conclusion this evening, I'm going to stay with this final theme as it was offered by a senior journalist and editor and sparked interest from the subsequent journalists we interviewed. He recalled how the political parties and other organized groups used to put pressure on journalists and newsrooms decades ago—pressure that coincided with the engaged voter portrayal witnessed between 1948-1968. He emphasized how outside pressures exerted on journalists by community groups, news organizations, and everyday citizens today might serve to remedy the concerns raised in this project. Such pressures could, in his mind, make journalists more mindful of roles of voters in campaigns, help generate storylines that are outside the speculative expertise of strategists and spinners, and connect with the interests and needs of readers.

Inspired by his suggestions, I advance the metaphor of "spinning for voters" as a means of producing a mindset that could lead to future campaign narratives that are respectful of both democratic and news norms. Specifically, I see spinning for voters as having four elements, all of which have their seeds in interviews with journalists who wrote for the papers I studied.

Spinning for Voters

First, spinning involves listening to voters. Reporters spoke openly about how listening to the concerns of real voters can help them tell important stories that need to be told. Although it is less efficient than summarizing polling data, listening to how voters understand the campaign can help reporters from missing critical elements of how people perceive their electoral choices. My interviewees, particularly journalism educators, echoed such concerns. They called attention to well documented prescriptions in the journalism literature, claiming that the best reporters are the best listeners; journalists should listen more than they speak; looking out the window of the campaign bus puts reporters in closer touch with the citizenry; and the public deserves a journalism "sophisticated and generous enough to relinquish the patronizing notion of a passive citizenry."

Second, spinning involves attending to context. The interviewees admitted that a key way to take strategists and spinners out of the campaign narrative is to focus on broader issues connected to the election. Shifting the focus tends to frustrate candidates and strategists because it "moves some of the control" of the news cycle out of their hands. Journalism scholar Eric Alterman advises that spinners can only influence the conversation when their spin fits the prevailing news narrative. As long as timeliness is the currency of news narratives, he observes, "wisdom is judged not on the depth of knowledge, but the speed with which it is acquired." He contends that "a more honest journalism could deal a mighty blow to the power of pseudo-language, pseudo-events and pseudo-environments in American politics" by replacing it "with a renewed respect for legitimate investigation and scholarship...when reporting emphasizes context and deeper expertise," he continues, spinners would "have to revert to becoming real journalists again, forced to test their desk-hardened opinions against a messy reality."

Third, spinning involves listening to blogs, citizen journalism, and local news. Many of the journalists we talked to were of two minds concerning citizen journalism and blogs and valued and were proud of their employment at elite news outlets. Toward

Such pressures could, in his mind, make journalists more mindful of roles of voters in campaigns...

the end of their interviews, however, many of these same journalists resigned themselves to admit that a third important type of *listening includes attending to the tone and content of blogs, citizen journalism, and local news*. One senior reporter did so with a dramatic gesture, licking his finger and putting it up into a hypothetical breeze, advising us to “follow the blogs. The answer may be there.”

Several of the journalists acknowledged how some of their well-known peers call for exactly such a move. Several cited a David Broder speech that emphasized an openness to citizen input. Indeed, in his address to the 1979 winners of the Pulitzer Prize, Broder stated:

We might even encourage the readers to contribute their own information and understanding to the process. We might even find ourselves acknowledging something most of us find hard to accept: that they have something to tell us, as well as to hear from us. And if those readers felt they were part of a communications process in which they were participants and not just passive consumers, then they might more easily understand that their freedoms—and not just ours—are endangered when the search warrants and subpoenas are visited on the press.

Other interviewees referenced an article by Geneva Overholser, recalling her self-reflections on the responsibility reporters have to citizens. As she put it:

We need to have a vision of our communities, what they are and what they could be, and the roles we can play in making it come about... Every time we think to ourselves that the political process is leaderless, self-important, risk-averse, colorless, self-perpetuating, pays lip service to change and avoids action on it—we ought to ask ourselves: Is this politics we are describing? Or us?”

Spinning involves listening to ourselves. Fourth, an interview with a political reporter turned journalism educator offered a sharpened, and lengthy,

observation on how many university professors and researchers are also guilty of neglecting voters. As he put it:

Not only do reporters forget about voters, but scholars do, too. Voters are the audience for the news. We should want to give them as many cues about how to sustain democratic life as possible. Your data

on references to the voters really mean something. They are more than just a slight form of style. News that engages voters

has an impact. These references (to voters as actors) become a type of content in the news. Content that should be encouraged for the betterment of democratic life. We can't take voters for granted, as journalists, as researchers, or as educators. They are the audience for news on campaigns and democratic life. It is a grave disservice to take them for granted.

His remarks reveal a fourth prescription, underscoring how a broader set of individuals can help to advocate for voters by listening to the biases in the language used when talking about electoral participation. By pointing the finger back at researchers and educators, this interviewee calls to mind patterns of neglect—in scholarly research, in educational materials, in public comments, and in language, itself—that may be equally as inadvertent for academics as for many of our interviewees.

Sidelining Voters

Typically, most research on politics focuses on elite actors, political candidates, and elected officials.

While these players are certainly important, a fixation on their activities limits a broader understanding of citizen actions, appetites, and understandings of politics. Methodologically, advances in measurement and analysis techniques have led to steady progress “in the amount of individual political behavior that could be explained.” While methodological sophistication and rigor are certainly valuable advancements, scholars have long cautioned that analyses of American voting can seem “unrelated to American politics” or, in the

...listening includes attending to the tone and content of blogs, citizen journalism, and local news.

...university professors and researchers are also guilty of neglecting voters.

words of V. O. Key, have “no real bearing on politics” as it can be “extraordinarily difficult to relate those findings to the workings of government, the payoff of the political process” or a “continuing interplay between elite and mass” concerns. In the wake of the 2000 election, political scholar Ann Crigler and colleagues returned to such an observation, contending that even though “participatory minimalists” appear to “have the better of things” in accounting for the power of individual voters, researchers may benefit by looking at participation more broadly, imagining it as “in and of itself, not just because it does or might in some remote counterfactual case affect actual political outcomes.” A plurality of approaches benefits any field, but given the executive and elitist tendencies of political research, the point that scholars are (consciously or subconsciously) culpable of studying electoral participation as detached from voter or citizen concerns bears stating.

Pedagogically, many university classes emphasize the gamesmanship of elections, perhaps at the expense of addressing the fragility of democracy. Research shows how individuals exposed to a “discussion of a model of rational choice participation” (in which the limited effects of each individual’s vote on the election’s outcome is emphasized) were found to be more negative toward the institution of elections and indicated that they would vote less often.

And, rhetorically, scholars are just as guilty (if not more so) than journalists of sidelining voters when commenting publicly on campaigns. A provocative content analysis conducted by Paul Brewer and Lee Sigelman shows that when researchers are quoted in the news, their quotations are often as strategic and game focused as those offered by strategists and spinners. In their coding, Brewer and Sigelman found that more than half of political scientists’ quotations in the news featured the game frame alone (and 80 percent of the quotations featured the game frame either by itself or in conjunction with an issue or leadership frame).

...many university classes emphasize the gamesmanship of elections, perhaps at the expense of addressing the fragility of democracy.

Elections, even if they are a contested symbol, merit our respect.

Benefits and Costs

What, then, are benefits and costs of calling for greater spinning for the voter? On one hand, the metaphor invites attention to the biggest frustration that reporters voiced with their political reporting: having to police the activities of self-serving interests hoping to control the news agenda. On the other, it acknowledges one of the most powerful ways to shape the news. When organized groups, researchers, and educators are not mindful that even we have

some control over the key words of electoral participation, we become guilty of contributing to the reification of elite forces over

the American electoral system. Most importantly, the metaphor of spinning for the voter addresses a characteristic that is often missing in other news reform strategies: the need to tell a good story. Storytelling is a “god term” for journalists, a pattern apparent in the published literature and a key theme from our interviews.

Democracies cannot sustain themselves. Elections, even if they are a contested symbol, merit our respect. To quote Gerald Pomper:

Even if they are imperfect, Elections still remain the primary way of achieving popular goals. Deprived groups with few resources other than their numbers must be aware

particularly of the uses of politics. Their vital resource must be employed where it is most effective—at the polls. The ballot does not guarantee improvement, but it does create opportunities for the amelioration of social conditions by bringing officials to consider the interests of any significant group. Elections in democracies allow a change of rule in ordinary ways and without awaiting extraordinary occasions. In such systems, therefore, officials avoid not only the extremely unpopular action but even the uncomfortable. A greater sensitivity by politicians to the anticipated reactions of the public is necessitated. No better means of protection has been devised. Security has not been provided by depending on

the good will of rulers, on the presumed identity of interests between governed or governors, or on institutional controls, such as a federal structure, or supervision by a monopolistic political party. To the ancient question, “who will guard the guardians?” there is only one answer: those who choose the guardians.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. I hope some of the observations offered might encourage you to join all of us at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas in working to track, and hopefully inspire, political conversations that lead to more voters and better citizens. Thank you.

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B. Aubrey Fisher

Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Masters and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than 35 articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including president of the Western Speech Communication Association, president of the International Communication Association, and editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

Sharon E. Jarvis

Sharon E. Jarvis, Ph.D., serves as Associate Professor of Communication Studies and Associate Director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation at the University of Texas at Austin, where she teaches and conducts research on political communication, persuasion and research methods.

She has published books and articles at the intersection of language use, politics and persuasion. She is the author of *The Talk of the Party: Political Labels, Symbolic Capital & American Life* and a co-author of *Political Keywords: Using Language that Uses Us*. Her articles, chapters, and reviews have appeared in *Journal of Communication*, *Political Psychology*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, and many more. She has been the Principal Investigator on a \$100,000 grant to investigate the political participation of college students and working youth (CIRCLE, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts), a co-principal-investigator on two related projects focusing on the politics of youth (over \$550,000 in funding from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts), and has headed an evaluation team for an intervention in San Antonio High Schools (\$500,000).

Dr. Jarvis has been the recipient of numerous teaching awards and honors, including the Texas Exes Outstanding Professor for the College of Communication, the Eyes of Texas Teaching Award, and the Outstanding Professor in the College of Communication. In 2005, she was the second Assistant Professor in the history of the University to receive the Friar Centennial Teaching Fellowship, the largest undergraduate teaching honor at U.T. Austin.

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