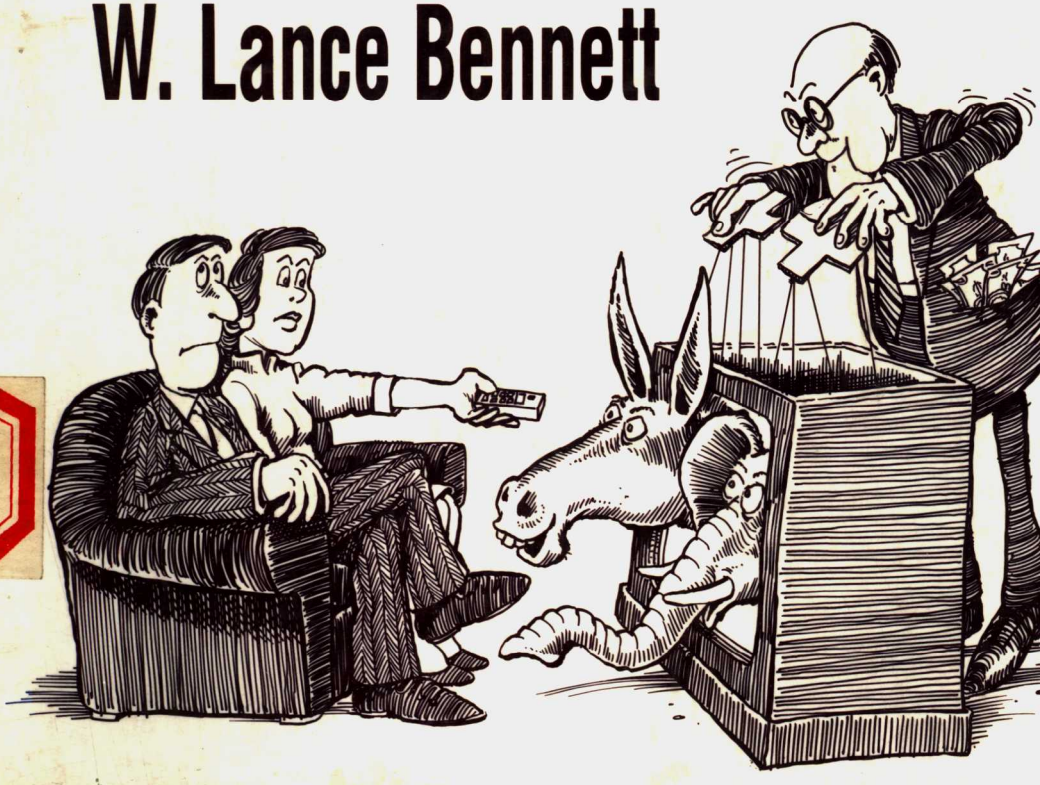
THE GOVERNING CRISIS

MEDIA, MONEY, and MARKETING in AMERICAN ELECTIONS

W. Lance Bennett



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Media, Money, and Marketing in American Elections

W. Lance Bennett
University of Washington

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This book is dedicated to the idea that ideas matter—particularly in politics. And to a time, not so long ago, when rhetoric was not a dirty word.

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novels. They came in handy when I needed a break. Thanks also to Bill Haltom, David Estrin, and Irving Rockwood for special contributions along the way.

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Preparing a manuscript on two continents could have been a nightmare without the help of several excellent typists. In Sweden, Liisa A. Melton learned to decode my scrawl and offered editorial assistance in the bargain. As for my secretary in Seattle, Ann Buscherfeld, I can only marvel at her ability to stay calm and error-free while doing so many things at once. Julie Morgan not only merged three separate word-processing files, but retyped most of the manuscript after I promised that the changes would be minor. And we remained friends after it was over.

The *Journal of Communication* and the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* were kind enough to grant permission to reprint portions of my previously published work in Chapters 5 and 6. And the *Wall Street Journal* gave permission to reprint parts of its editorial commentary on the election of 1990.

A final word of thanks goes to friends and colleagues who have helped my personal life and my needs as a writer fit together. To Don McCrone, David Olson, and Don Matthews at the University of Washington, thanks for the support and friendship over the years. And to Bettina Lüscher, thanks for making life fun.

W. Lance Bennett
SEATTLE AND UPPSALA

For perspective, imagine that Captain Kirk and the starship *Enterprise* trekked to the third planet of an ordinary star in an obscure arm of the Milky Way. And imagine that they discovered that the most important nation there was ruled by 535 elders, elected in their youth to life terms. Well perhaps not quite life. Elders were permitted to resign if overcome by a sense of meaninglessness, a not uncommon occurrence. And in extraordinary circumstances, say a second offense of sexual abuse, social pressure would force them to stand down.

Once anointed, of course, elders were expected to take up life at court. Their only obligation was to visit the territory from which they had been elected every two or six years, depending on their rank, to go through the formality of reanointment. While not given great wealth if they did not already have it, they were provided with everything wealth could buy: marble palaces, large staffs of retainers to do their bidding and most of all the expectation of deference by lesser humans. They could summon and bully commercial titans or certified scientific geniuses, for example. And of course, their enterprises were immune from the laws that bound common citizens.

There were intrigues and disputes among the elders, but these were resolved by subtle systems of social controls; those who defied the sacred consensus were ostracized as trouble-makers, particularly if they gave voice to plebeian objections to the provisions for or commanded by elders. This curious system called itself government of the people, by the people and for the people. Searching the anthropological tapes, Mr. Spock classified it as an elected aristocracy.

—Wall Street Journal Editorial

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INTRODUCTION

Politics in the Age of Unreason

"Read My Lips: No New Ideas."

A "sound bite" from the political speech of the future? It is telling that ten-second slices—or "bites"—of speech written for airplay on the nightly news are passing for political ideas these days. While the nation's problems grow in size and number, candidates for political office seem ever more obligated to financial backers and less interested in arousing a sleeping electorate. For reasons to be explored in this book, the national marketplace of ideas has broken down. Voting and elections no longer work as demand-side forces shaping the quality of candidates and ideas. It is as though some hidden hand has restrained national debate, reducing the range of choice in one of the world's most important political forums. The search for what moves this hidden hand takes us into the netherworld of political finance, Madison Avenue–style candidate marketing, and the emerging science of media control. These facts of modern political life explain a good deal about the current national scene, from the decline of political parties, to the reasons why few politicians seem interested in drawing discouraged citizens back into the system.

Opinion polls and voting rates show that interest in politics has dropped steadily over the last twenty years. During the same time, the list of unsolved national problems has grown longer and more worrisome: debt and budgetary paralysis, foreign competition, political corruption, declining economic production, and a host of social ills—from crime, drug abuse, and homelessness, to a failing educational system. This book explores the connection between the quality of political life and society's ability to define and solve its most pressing problems.

This is not a gloom-and-doom prophecy about how America is on the brink of total collapse. Even worst-case scenarios like economic depressions can be (and have been) overcome. This said, the social and economic problems listed above have come home in ways that are nevertheless troublesome and worth thinking about. Whether we are talking about

the stress of holding down jobs in economically embattled workplaces, the sensory overload of city streets, the amnesia-producing atmosphere of public schools, or the risks of going out at night in crime-ridden neighborhoods, life in contemporary America is disturbingly out of sync with what one might expect in one of history's richest and most powerful societies. The trials of public life take their toll in the private realm as well. In the words of one observer, Americans have adapted to the long winter of their discontents with a "bunker mentality," zealously protecting private lives from a declining civic culture and rising social ills.[1]

When the governing center does not hold, individuals must fend for themselves. This lesson applies not just to the down-and-out, but to the up-and-coming as well, since for all of society's individuals the quality of private life depends on the quality of public life. Above all, our personal well-being rides on the strength of the political system and its leaders. This idea is hardly news. Aristotle long ago observed that the "good life" begins (and can end) with the kind of political arrangements and leadership a society accepts. Restoring public interest in government, trust in leadership, and commitment to a liveable society for all are essential steps toward real solutions for problems like crime, homelessness, drug abuse, education, economic revitalization, and other obstacles to the "good life."

The point is simply this: At a minimum, lively political debate is required to engage the creative imagination of a people. Such debate depends on leaders who are willing to articulate new ideas, take risks, and motivate public action. Tired of waiting for such leaders to appear, many people have left the political arena altogether for other, less frustrating pursuits. By the end of the last decade, for example, more New Yorkers were buying lottery tickets than voting by a ratio of 3 to 2.[2] And the current decade opened with a solid majority (60 percent) of the American public agreeing that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does."[3]

This is not to suggest that politicians are unaware of what the public wants them to be doing. Hired media consultants advise their political clients about images that can be marketed to voters who remain in the system. And so, politicians and parties do battle over who appears to care the most about the issues that most concern the voters. Case in point: Running on promises to be the environmental president, George Bush encouraged voters worried about the "greenhouse effect" to imagine the "White House effect" they could create by electing him. After the election, however, the most decisive environmental action in the first year of the Bush administration was to join forces with Japan and the Soviet Union in scuttling an international agreement that would have reduced carbon dioxide emissions blamed for most of the global warming trend.

For an encore, Mr. Bush cut funds for cleaning up Boston Harbor from his first budget—this after making the nation's most polluted harbor a cause célèbre in his campaign.

A similar avoidance of reality characterizes American leadership in international economics. After it became obvious that the nation's economy faced stiff competition from Japan and Europe, Washington's response was to bluster about how unfair these competitors were being. When the moment of truth arrived and a U.S. trade delegation visited Japan to begin official talks, their agenda of complaints must have astounded the Japanese. For openers, the delegation accused Japan of "needlessly" running a national budget surplus. Following this accusation was an attack on Japanese farm subsidy programs. And bringing up the rear was a criticism of Japanese companies for excessive loyalty—that is, for buying their own nation's products rather than those manufactured abroad.[4] The audacity of such concerns can only be appreciated against a backdrop of a chronic American budget deficit, the sacred cow of U.S. farm supports for everything from corn to tobacco, and laments about corporate and consumer disloyalty. As the "Roaring 80s" drew to a close, the chairman of Sony Corporation responded to American worries about his purchase of Columbia Pictures by saying bluntly: "I'm worrying for America seriously, seriously. I'm worrying about why America has changed, has lost industrial power, and just is making money by moving money around. Unless you produce something, you cannot have basic power in an economy."[5]

Not long after the Sony takeover of Columbia, former president Ronald Reagan visited Japan on a $7 million promotional tour sponsored by Fujisankei Communications Group, the largest media conglomerate in the country. Reagan personally pocketed $2 million for his string of cameo appearances over a nine-day period. Once among the loudest critics of "unfair" Japanese competition, the former chief executive pronounced the Japanese buyout of America a good thing, observing that, after all, the United States had been doing it to other nations around the world for years. Wasn't turnabout fair play?

This and countless similar lapses in national leadership have sent millions of Americans fleeing from public life in dismay. Failing to find leadership anywhere but on the easy moral high ground of abortion, drugs, or flag burning, a near majority have retreated from voting, which surely ranks among the least demanding forms of political participation. Meanwhile, a steady procession of candidates continues to walk softly into public office carrying the big stick of high-cost, Madison Avenue campaigning.

The Democrats these days score no higher than the Republicans on any obvious test of civic virtue. Despite opinion polls showing majorities supporting traditional Democratic positions on a whole range of issues,

the party has been unable to build a governing coalition around a program for national renewal. Part of the problem is that the Democrats are not so much a party as a loose coalition of political entrepreneurs whose individual members wield more power on congressional committees and with financial backers if they continue to call themselves a party. There are signs that the party has come together more often in recent years around environmental, social welfare, and civil rights legislation. Perhaps a change is in the wind. But the pull of special interests is still on display each year during the battle over the budget and the repeated avoidance of effective reforms in campaign finance and election practices.

People who have seen these signs of Democratic disunity have reason to mistrust the sincerity of candidates who run on the issues, or to doubt the commitment of the party to stand behind candidates who really care about those issues. As a result, most of the candidates who run on "anti-establishment" issues end up losing, leading pundits to mistrust the polls themselves. Puzzling? Yes. A result of faulty opinion polls? No. Part of the trouble lies with a system that gives undue advantages to incumbents, particularly in the House of Representatives. Begin with the average representative's large campaign chest that leaves challengers unable to compete with costly and sophisticated voter marketing analyses and media campaigns. Then add the public relations points scored by incumbents who long ago realized that offering services to constituents compensates for not being able to offer many ideas. Combine these two factors and you get a Congress that is something of an upscale social service agency. The full range of services runs from delivering special favors to savings-and-loan owners who have made deposits in congressional campaign accounts, to delivering lost social security checks to senior citizens who have been loyal voters. All of which begins to explain at least one of the puzzling trends in the opinion polls: voters blaming Congress for many of the problems facing the nation, but tending to make an exception when it comes to their own representative.

There is an even deeper reason why opinion polls call for changes, but elections continue reproducing the same unsatisfying results. The link between public opinion on particular issues and votes has seldom been a strong one in American politics. What sells in America is not a collection of single issues, but the ideas or vision behind the issues. The Democrats have not had a vision since the Great Society of the 1960s. Not surprisingly, they haven't won the White House very often either. As a conservative, Ronald Reagan had the luxury of taking an old vision from the shelf, dusting it off, and, to his credit, selling it with conviction and theatrical style. Whether or not they like it, the Democrats have been cast as America's alternative to conservatism. For many Americans, when there is no

compelling alternative, conservatism will just have to do. As a group of party intellectuals put it in a heated debate about what ails the Democrats, what the party needs is a "new story" about America to tell the public.[6] In the meantime, those who continue to vote continue to curb their expectations and send one party to Congress and the other to the White House—more or less putting the system on hold until a governing coalition with plausible new ideas comes along to get the national dialogue going again.

Is there a cure for the election-time blues? The answer contained in the last chapter of this book is "yes"—but not if Americans by the tens of millions sit and watch their political system break down around them. Staying on the present course of government promises little for social renewal. The latest five-year plan for getting a grip on the budget was greeted in its first year of operation by the largest deficit in American history. On the world scene, the decision to wage war against Iraq sent a clear signal that geopolitics outweighs domestic priorities on the Washington agenda. The state of this union suggests that liberating Kuwait was more important (or at least easier to imagine) than saving Newark, Detroit, South Chicago, or East L.A. This book explores one of the principal reasons why governing the nation these days is nearly impossible: the election system has shut off the flow of new governing ideas in American politics. Here's why . . .

Three behind-the-scenes factors have grown in recent years to dominate contemporary elections. The first is campaign financing. For reasons to be explained in later chapters, candidates and parties have been driven into stiff competition for the huge sums of money required to win elections in a system that has fewer restrictions on spending, advertising, and funding than any Western industrial democracy. One controversial view of the finance system has gone so far as to describe elections as investment opportunities for big business. This political investment thesis argues that Democratic candidates have been leveraged steadily to the right in order to compete with Republicans for campaign dollars from their own former backers.[7] As a result, the range of meaningful political difference between candidates has decreased steadily, moving both parties out of line with the majority of voters and leaving candidates with little to offer the dwindling numbers who remain interested in politics.

Scholars disagree about how much unity of interest exists (or ever has existed) among political backers. Our explanation does not require establishing this difficult-to-document point. Assume that there is little common interest and even less conspiracy among the diverse range of political party backers. The problem is that individual candidates at all levels, from president and Congress, down to the states, have been separated from

their party loyalties by an elaborate system of individual funding from interest groups. Congress, for example, has been so carved up by the finance system that it now makes sense to talk about two levels of representation: patchwork, issue-by-issue blocs representing various national interests, and strategic district representation (service delivery and "pork barrel" projects) for the folks back home. There is precious little room left for thinking about—much less, acting on—any broader public interest. The result is a system that virtually prevents broad coalitions from taking concerted action on complex issues. There is little chance that presidents can even mobilize their own congressional parties on broad legislative agendas that might generate real public enthusiasm. What has developed instead is a veto system in which the faction of the day, either in Congress or the White House, is likely to block any sweeping initiatives contemplated by more visionary public officials. Not surprisingly, politicians as a group have declined in popularity.

The task of selling these damaged political goods brings us to the second factor: the systematic marketing of candidates. Image-making and hype have always been part of American politics, but never with the all-consuming importance they have attained in contemporary campaigning. Candidates whose inventory of ideas has been reduced by the stiff competition for campaign financing have become overwhelmingly dependent on marketing experts and image consultants to manufacture content for otherwise empty campaigns. Scientific techniques for audience analysis and product development have enabled campaigns to compensate for content deficiencies by targeting key groups of voters who respond to manufactured, test-marketed images in sufficient numbers to tilt the electoral balance.

The third pillar of the new politics is the perfection of techniques for controlling the news media. Reporters, understandably enough, resent being manipulated by image consultants. Discouraged by the often futile search for anything meaningful to write home about, journalists stalk the candidates, looking for the slightest sign of weakness or the hint of a controversial idea. Controlling the press pack thus becomes essential for the success of campaigns already mortgaged to financial backers and image-makers. Enter the technology of media management, with its Orwellian vocabulary of *spin doctors, damage control, sound bites, line of the day,* and *photo opportunities,* all orchestrated by the ever-present *handlers* whose job is to keep reporters as far removed from spontaneous contact with the candidate as possible. Welcome to the postmodern election.

Special interest money, candidate marketing, and media control have created a new electoral system. Since we are not talking about a revolution here, many reminders of the old system still remain. The names of the parties are unchanged; the rules for deciding winners and losers are the

same; and there is more than enough hype, hoopla, and negativity to go around. But the heart is missing: the promise of governing is gone.

Political communication in the new American election is a private, emotional affair between individual candidates and individual voters. The aim is getting votes, not developing broad support for governing ideas. Society has become an abstraction of media audiences and voter market segments. Missing almost entirely is any sort of give-and-take exchange through which social groups, parties, and candidates might develop mutual commitments to a broad political agenda. America has arrived at a point of nearly complete separation of elections and governing.

The plan of the book is to develop the above thesis, see how it holds up under criticism, explore the consequences for democracy in America, and propose a set of simple political reforms. Chapter 1 begins by looking at the case of the 1988 election, a contest that left voters dazed by distasteful extremes of negative campaigning, not to mention a host of other puzzling features, including Michael Dukakis' abandonment of traditional Democratic constituencies while driving around in a tank like a Charles Schulz cartoon character, and George Bush's recitation of lines from Clint Eastwood movies. Beneath the tragicomic surface, we find the convergence of forces that have pushed American government into its current status as a veto system. Among other things, 1988 was that memorable year in which the House of Representatives achieved the pinnacle of a 98 percent reelection rate for incumbent candidates, while a disgusted public complained about the quality of Congress. The same public elected a president who became more popular the less he did and less popular the more that events forced him to do anything. In the end, George Bush rescued his popularity by turning away from the home front and going to war. Understanding these and other puzzles is necessary preparation for analyzing the elections of the 1990s at the end of the book.

Chapter 2 explains how traditional uses of media, money, and marketing have changed over the last several decades, resulting in a system of elections and campaigning that offers voters little promise of good government. This new electoral system is not so much a radical break with traditions of the past as a recombination of existing practices into a mass communications process that has elevated the worst tendencies of American politics to the norm in recent times. These shifts in the ways people and their leaders communicate can be traced to several historical changes in modern American politics, including the decline of voter loyalty to political parties (particularly the Democrats) beginning in the 1970s and the rise of a new campaign finance system legislated by Congress during the same period of time.

Chapter 3 explores various criticisms that might be raised against the idea that a significant change is taking place at the center of American politics. A brief review of the history of elections shows which of these criticisms have merit and which miss their mark. Chapter 4 returns to the three main elements of money, media, and marketing, showing in greater detail how each affects the quality of campaigning. So ends Part I.

The second part of the book examines the consequences for a political culture when its central ritual begins to fall apart. Beyond the command of any individual, culture is the memory bank of collective experience, the storehouse of sacred mythology, and the guidance system for defining problems and thinking about the future. The American guidance system is currently on the blink. Chapter 5 illustrates the difference between election rituals that are empty and devoid of meaning for their participants, and those that remain vital sources of social inspiration and renewal. Despite becoming increasingly emptied of social vision and spontaneous expressions of candidate character, election campaigns continue to display many familiar ritualistic trappings, including the traditional rallies, flag-waving, and negative campaigning. Candidates who continue to go through the motions of the ritual make it hard to spot, much less talk about, what has gone awry. Comparing several recent elections helps to pinpoint where the changes are occurring and why.

Chapter 6 examines the crucial importance of leadership in American politics. In many ways our elections are more about choosing the right leaders for the times than about this or that particular policy or program. Perhaps the most distressing element of the new politics is the reduced chance of seeing the candidates respond intuitively and spontaneously to each other and to the stresses of the year-long campaign ordeal. In this respect, the combined effects of high finance, candidate marketing, and media control have short-circuited the election as a basic test of character and leadership.

Instead of letting voters and candidates work out new political plots through the rough-and-tumble exchanges of an open campaign, media consultants play it safe, replaying old plot lines that worked the last time around and adding a few image twists that market researchers have tried out on "test audiences" before splicing them onto the candidate's (or the opponent's) character. The result is that American elections are becoming, in the famous words of Yogi Berra, "like déjà vu all over again." Each of our recent elections has been similarly frustrating, empty, and built on feeble incantations that serve poorly for choosing leaders, discussing pressing problems, and uniting behind sensible courses of action. Far from being the vital centerpiece or nerve center of a thriving political culture, elections have become a fig leaf for a political system in crisis. The result, as noted

above, is that we are dangerously close to losing our guidance system, our collective intelligence, if you will. As Republican commentator Kevin Phillips has observed: "From the White House to Capitol Hill, the critical weakness of American politics and governance is becoming woefully apparent: a frightening inability to define and debate emerging problems. For the moment, the political culture appears to be brain-dead."[8]

The crucial question, of course, is how long will this moribund cultural condition persist? If I thought the prognosis irreversible, I would not have written this book. Part III looks at the 1990s with an eye to reforms. There are, it seems to me, a number of simple, practical remedies that would help bring the nation out of its political coma and speed the recovery of the culture. And without reforms, the electoral prospects for the future are even gloomier. Dan Quayle, anyone? Chapter 7 begins by exploring both the kind of politics and politicians we can expect if nothing is done to derail the current system of financing, marketing, and media control.

Celluloid candidates and imaginary issues are just the symptoms of deeper problems with the system. The weakening link between elections and governing is the more fundamental problem. While it has never been easy to draw straight connections between votes and eventual government policies, at least governments of the past were able to take broad actions on problems that arguably fell into some range of the public interest. In recent times, however, the centrifugal pull of special interests at every level of government has left little chance for coherent action on pressing public problems. Simply enacting a national budget each year has become a major challenge and frequent crisis of governing.

This dilemma has not been lost on the public who opened the 1990s with a whopping 77 percent agreement on the belief that the government was being run for the benefit of business and a few special interests. This belief has increased steadily with each passing decade since the rosy dawn of the 1960s when only 25 percent shared that view.[9] Not surprisingly, nearly 80 percent of the public entered the 1990s with the opinion that "America is in serious trouble,"[10] giving most Americans something in common with the chairman of Sony Corporation. Perhaps the convergence of these forces of government paralysis and public distress is reflected most strongly in three simple facts about the congressional elections of 1990: most Americans blamed Congress for a large part of the trouble with America; most Americans also made an exception in the case of their own representatives; and for the third straight election, incumbents in the House of Representatives were returned to office at a stunning rate of 96 percent or higher. How long can this pressure and these contradictions build without exploding? Which election will bring on the voter eruption? And what results, if any, will come of it? Chapter 7 closes