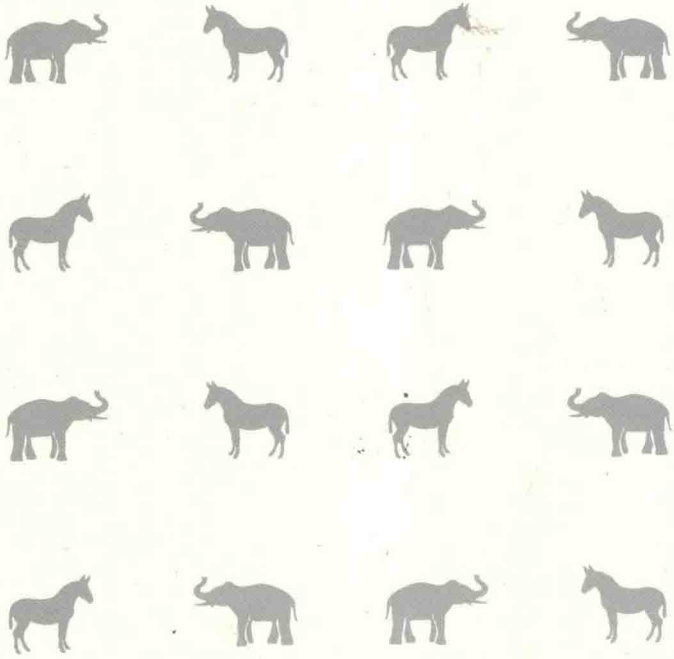
INTERPRETING ELECTIONS

STANLEY KELLEY, JR.



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FOR
STELLA E. KELLEY

PREFACE

In "The Simple Act of Voting," published in 1974, Thad Mirer and I proposed a theory of voting and tested it with data drawn from the University of Michigan's surveys of voters in the six presidential elections from 1952 to 1968. Our objective was "to improve upon current explanations of voters' choices," and in our concluding remarks we argued that our view of voting had "immediate implications for those who interpret elections" and "consequences of importance for one's view of the American electorate." This book shows in detail what some of those implications and consequences are.

The central ideas of the book reflect three distinct sets of influences. The academic study of voting is the first and most obvious of these, and, like most other students of that subject, I owe a particularly great intellectual debt to the authors of *The American Voter*—Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. The ideas of professional campaigners—interpreters of elections in progress—have also been a strong influence. The efforts of campaigners to understand how the many particular concerns of voters translate into victory and defeat at the polls have interested me for a long time and have shaped my own conception of that process in many ways. Political philosophy, my first love in the study of politics, has been a third important influence, one that has urged me continually toward attempts to puzzle out how elections contribute to, or impair, the health and stability of democratic government. My attention in this book to electoral mandates and to the quality of electoral decisions arises out of a concern for the meaning of elections in this larger sense.

Surveys of opinion have provided most of my data on the attitudes and behavior of voters. My heaviest reliance is on eight studies of presidential elections conducted by the Center for Political Studies (and various antecedent organizations) of the Institute of Social Research of the University of Michigan;

indeed, the reader may assume that the information presented in tables and figures comes from these studies unless I have specifically noted otherwise. The Michigan surveys, financed in recent years by the National Science Foundation (and in earlier ones by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Rockefeller Foundation) are made widely available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. They have become a virtually indispensable resource for the empirical study of elections, and this book, certainly, could not have been written without access to them. In Chapter 9, which examines the press's interpretations of the 1980 elections, I have also taken data from surveys by the *New York Times* and CBS News, NBC News and the Associated Press, ABC News, ABC News and Louis Harris and Associates, the Gallup Poll, the *Los Angeles Times, Newsweek,* and *Time.* For helping to make information from these surveys available I am grateful to Jeffrey D. Alderman, David M. Alpern, Michael Kagay, Andrew Kohut, Patricia McGann, Mark A. Shulman, Linda Simmons, and John F. Stacks.

Friends have done a great deal to make this book a better one than my efforts alone could have produced. The manuscript was read in whole or in part by Douglas Arnold, James DeNardo, Harold Feiveson, Fred Greenstein, Amy Gutmann, Jennifer Hochschild, Walter F. Murphy, Richard Shapiro, and Dennis Thompson, all of Princeton University, and by Michael Kagay of Louis Harris and Associates, C. Anthony Broh and Gerald Pomper of Rutgers University, Thomas Ferguson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Howard Husock of WGBH Television (Boston), Glenn Shafer of Kansas University, Michael Stoto of Harvard University, and Edward Tufte of Yale University. Both for their encouragement and for their detailed and pointed criticisms, I am extremely grateful.

I am also personally indebted to many others. Asif Agha, Robert Bennett, Daniel Feinstein, John G. Geer, Wendy Gerber, John Hass, Ken John, Uday Mehta, Richard Sobel, Michael Stoto, Jan Viehman, and Acquila Washington have served as research assistants; individually and collectively,

they have shown phenomenal energy, diligence, patience, and intelligence. Carol Treanor and Douglas Danforth of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences helped me with computing while I was a Fellow at the Center and even taught me something of the art of computing. Judith Rowe and J. R. Piggott have facilitated my work at the Princeton Computer Center. June Traube was mainly responsible for typing the manuscript and otherwise readying it for the publisher. Her speed, sense of humor, and good spelling—the latter finely honed by much playing of Scrabble—make it a pleasure to work with her. She was ably assisted on occasion by Joan Carroll, Chen Chien, Nils Dennis, Dorothy Dey, and Mildred Kalmus. For financial support, and for making time available for my research, I am grateful to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and to Princeton University. William Hively and Sanford Thatcher of Princeton University Press deserve great credit for their handling both of the manuscript and its author. Finally, I thank my mother, to whom this book is dedicated. For several long periods she provided me with a quiet retreat in which to write, companionship, much good food, and a degree of tolerance that I could not have asked even from my best friends.

For the interpretations of the data I have used and for the shortcomings of this book, I alone am responsible.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The belief that elections carry obvious messages is widely shared in democratic nations. It is held by many protest voters, surely, and evidently by those politicians, reporters, editors, scholars, and promoters of causes and interests who, in the immediate aftermath of an election, say with great assurance what it means. The same belief has been a premise of democratic theorists, many of whom, like John Stuart Mill, have seen elections as a "periodical muster of opposing forces, to gauge the state of the national mind, and ascertain, beyond dispute, the relative strength of different parties and opinions."[1]

The wide acceptance of this view of elections is puzzling. Unquestionably, voters have reasons for voting as they do and, in that sense, send messages. One may, for example, reasonably think of a blindly partisan voter as saying, "I like any Democrat better than any Republican" (or vice versa). But why should anyone believe that the content of the millions of messages sent in a national election (or that of the tens of thousands in any large constituency) is easily grasped? Certainly, election *returns* convey very little information. In Walter Lippmann's words,

> We call an election an expression of the popular will. But is it? We go into a polling booth and mark a cross on a piece of paper for one of two, or perhaps three or four names. Have we expressed our thoughts on the public policy of the United States? Presumably we have a number of thoughts on this and that with many buts and ifs

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government,* Gateway Edition (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962) p. 230.

> and ors. Surely the cross on a piece of paper does not express them.[2]

A vote is only an avowal of support at a particular time, very often of support with reservations. The count of votes tells no one how far voters will follow the victorious candidate, or for how long, or in what direction.

Of course, election returns come to us in a context—particular candidates have raised particular issues against a background of particular events—and we also have crude rules of thumb that relate this context to voting; for instance, we believe that voters care most about matters touching their personal interests, that partisans tend to vote for their party's candidates, that honesty in candidates is highly valued, and so on. Given only such contextual information and such rules, however, anyone who is reasonably clever can easily "explain" an election's outcome in several different ways, all equally convincing. Consider a critical election like that of 1860: It will be forever unknown how much the slavery issue contributed to its outcome and how much economic interests did, because we have no specific knowledge of the considerations that the voters of that time brought to their choices and no way of ascertaining them. Our legitimate confidence in interpreting the elections of small clubs and caucuses underlines the point. In that setting one can find out what voters saw at stake, how firmly they stood behind candidates, and how pleased voters were with their choices. In large constituencies this kind of information is lacking, unless it is deliberately acquired by research. In the absence of such, mass electorates imply massive ignorance about the meaning of elections.

Sampling is a practical answer to this problem of numbers, and sample surveys of the electorate are a way to acquire for large groups of voters information that is easily acquired for very small ones. Thus, the advent of the sample survey has been a development of major importance for the interpreta-

[2] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), pp. 56–57.