



# Reflections on Television's Role in American Presidential Elections

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# Reflections on Television's Role in American Presidential Elections

by Lawrence K. Grossman

Discussion Paper D-3  
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The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

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PRESS • POLITICS



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# INTRODUCTION

Larry Grossman was my friend well before he was my boss. Let me explain: Larry was at Columbia when I was at the City College of New York in the early 1950s. We shared a common enthusiasm for books and basketball. Only years later, after Larry had worked for CBS's Frank Stanton, run his own public relations business and been president of PBS, did he become president of NBC News—and my boss. It was 1984, a presidential election year. I was then chief diplomatic correspondent for NBC and moderator of Meet the Press. I felt a rush of pride that an old friend had been appointed to such an important job.

For a number of reasons, including a sense of growing disillusionment with the direction of network news, I left NBC for Harvard in June 1987, capping a 30-year career in broadcasting. Larry left NBC in August 1988 after a series of squabbles with General Electric, which had acquired the network. Happily, it fell to me in February 1989 to ask Larry to accept the position as visiting Frank Stanton Lecturer in the First Amendment, teach a class, and do a research paper on his reflections as president of a network about the impact of TV news on the campaign process. Who better?

The class was a success, no great surprise, and during the summer and fall of 1989, Larry collected his reflections into a paper, which we now take great pleasure and pride in distributing. I do not share all of his opinions. For example, I think TV news is just as capable as newspapers of providing solid journalism. I don't think it's TV that alone explains a run of one-term presidents; after all, Richard Nixon didn't have to engineer Watergate, and Ronald Reagan served two terms and, for all we know, George Bush may also serve two terms. And though I'd like to believe that TV has smoked out the politicians from their "smoke-filled rooms," I suspect that most major political decisions are still made behind closed doors with cameras in the corridors waiting for the politicians to emerge with their prepared, packaged explanations.

But these are only reservations, which detract very little, if at all, from my admiration for the sweep and thoughtfulness of Larry's observations. His central theme is the power of TV news to affect the presidential campaign process. No one who lived through the 1988 campaign could argue with the theme. TV was everywhere, dominating the political landscape and determining agenda, appearance and ads. TV provided the American people with more information touching on presidential campaigns than any other source, and yet more of them stayed at home, forsaking their franchise, than at any other time since 1924. What's wrong? Is it the impact of TV? Or is it something even more pervasive and profound? I have a feeling that Grossman's emphasis upon the power of TV to distort the political process is probably accurate. But then what can be done about it?

Grossman advances six specific recommendations aimed at answering the question.

1. More diversified television, reaching well beyond the established networks: more information to more people.

2. Establish a new primary system ending with one day of primary voting in June.

3. Encourage the networks to run long, live interviews with the presidential candidates on their regularly scheduled evening newscasts. (More of what Candidates '88 did on PBS during the primary season.)

4. Suspend the equal time rule.

5. Every candidate must participate in a certain number of televised debates, or get no federal campaign funds. A new law would be required.

6. Accept responsibility personally and publicly for your "attack commercials" or, again, get no federal campaign funds.

There are legal questions about a law requiring a candidate to speak. The First Amendment may also mean that a candidate does not have to speak. But Grossman's six-point plan is a serious prod to discussion of the presidential campaign process. I'd be grateful for any comment or follow-up.

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## REFLECTIONS ON TELEVISION'S ROLE IN AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

More than a century before television came on the scene, Alexis deToqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, "The press. . .constitutes a singular power, so strangely composed of mingled good and evil that liberty could not live without it, and public order can hardly be maintained against it." That is a remarkably perceptive description of the role that television plays in presidential politics today.

In 1988 the American electorate had access to more abundant political information on television than ever before. In addition to saturation election coverage by the mainstream commercial networks, there was extensive daily coverage by most television stations; thorough and sophisticated political reporting and analysis by public television on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, the weekly *Frontline* documentary series and others; hundreds of hours on cable's CNN, and thousands of hours of live and taped transmissions of virtually every major presidential campaign speech, debate, convention, and caucus on cable's C-SPAN, the highly regarded television-of-record service.

Yet more people stayed home on election day than in any presidential election since 1924. And the post-mortems that followed the 1988 presidential election campaign were strongly critical of the role that television played. High on the list of complaints were the networks' preoccupation with: the "horse race;" candidates' private lives; opinion polls; soundbite coverage; staged debates; issues such as the Pledge of Allegiance, love of the flag, death penalty and prison furloughs, which have little relevance to presidential power or performance, and "inside baseball" reporting of the campaigns at the expense of important political issues. Other complaints focused on the prevalence of negative attack advertising and manipulation of the news by the campaigns' media managers and spin doctors.

Political analysts, politicians, and print journalists decry the disproportionate influence of television on presidential elections. In his 1972 edition of *The Making of a President*, the late Theodore White wrote, "The power of the

press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda for public discussion and this sweeping power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people think about and write about an authority that, in other nations, is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins."

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Walter Dean Burnham, Professor of Government at the University of Texas, wrote, "The dominance of the media over our politics, has now led to the creation of a monstrosity that presents a grave danger to what is left of democracy in the United States. According to Austin Ranney of the American Enterprise Institute, "The media system is the new elector of the modern political age. Networks have become the opposing party, the shadow cabinet." This paper analyzes four dominant characteristics of television that shape its influence on presidential elections:

1. Television's unique ability to give the nation direct access to political leaders and major events.

2. Television's conventional mainstream bias which tends to reflect public opinion rather than lead it.

3. Television's predominant role as a medium of entertainment and advertising.

4. Television's inherent emphasis on personality, visual image and emotion rather than on ideas, issues, and reason. The paper concludes with six specific suggestions designed to improve the quality of television's performance in future presidential elections.

## *Providing a Direct Experience*

In the late 18th century, Thomas Jefferson envisioned an ideal democratic system for this country based on self-contained rural communities populated by fully informed and involved citizens who possess a clear picture of their world and who directly control their own political destiny. As Dumas Malone wrote in *Jefferson and the Rights of Man*, Jefferson ". . . had long emphasized the necessity of educating the people generally, and he. . . strongly stressed the importance of keeping them informed about specific issues."

"The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right;" Jefferson said in a much quoted phrase, "and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers; or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

In the early twentieth century, Walter Lippmann, that seminal thinker about the role of the media, was convinced that in view of the rapidly increasing size and complexity of industrial society the press was not capable of performing its essential role to enable every citizen "to acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs."

"The protection of the source of its opinion is the basic problem of democracy," Lippmann wrote in *Liberty and the News* (1920). In *Public Opinion* (1922) Lippmann said, "The press is like the beam of searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode, then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern by episodes, incidents and eruptions. . . The world we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported and imagined."

The basic problem as Lippmann saw it was that, like the parable of Plato's cave, "the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside." To deal with the inability of the press to shape a reasoned and informed public opinion, Lippmann proposed an elite "central clearing house of intelligence," that would inform both the press and the government's decision-makers, and through them, the public itself. Lippmann's

elite information experts (modelled, no doubt, on his own influential role as columnist and presidential adviser) would overcome "the limited nature of news" and "the illimitable complexity of society."

Today, in place of Jefferson's fully informed and personally involved citizenry and Lippmann's elite clearing house of intelligence, we have the mass medium of television, an electronic superhighway that leads directly into every home and provides instant and universal public access both to political leaders and national political events. In that respect, television can be seen as making possible a modern day electronic form of Jeffersonian direct democracy by eliminating the barriers of time and distance that separate the people from their national leaders. With its companion technologies, the satellite, computer and telephone, television offers an intimate view of

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presidents, and even vice presidents, who were once distant and remote, and brings home major national and world events that were formerly available only to the privileged few. Television's universal accessibility produces an unprecedented sharing of information among every segment of the nation's electorate, rich and poor, old and young, city and country, all of whom, regardless of class or educational level, tend to watch the same programs.

The central force that gives television its extraordinary political clout is its ability to provide every viewer with what appears to be an unfiltered, first-hand view of reality. As George Welden, Britain's former Minister for Higher Education, put it, "The peculiar potency of television lies not in the wickedness of the journalists who operate the machine but in the very nature of the machine." With the average

American television set turned on seven hours a day, it is a machine that gives tens of millions of viewers the simultaneous experience, partly real and partly illusion, of being on-the-scene participants in the major happenings of our time.

By contrast, the print media—news-papers, magazines and books—provide essentially a second-hand view of the world, one that is of necessity always filtered through the words of reporters, editors, columnists, and public officials. The print reporter may be better informed, more experienced and more intelligent about what he is reporting than the average television viewer. But because television gives the viewer a first-hand view of what is happening, the public sees television as inherently more trustworthy, more believable, and more reliable than any other medium of information, as demonstrated by the findings of every Gallup and Roper poll on the subject in recent years. That preference for television has nothing to do with the quality of its reporting, as compared to newspapers or magazines. It has everything to do with the character of the medium itself, "the very nature of the machine," to use George Welden's phrase. The core of television's strength lies in its *coverage*, its ability to transmit what is happening while it is happening, wherever it is happening. The strength of the print media lies in its *journalism*, its ability to transmit descriptions, ideas and interpretations of what is happening. To the public at large, live pictures seem more real and reliable than someone else's description, expressed in words and sentences on paper.

In recent years, some of television's reality and reliability have been usurped by skilled professional campaign managers like Michael Deaver and Roger Ailes, whose business it is to manipulate television's mechanics and visual images. They have broken the code of television's news coverage and have taken the play away from the medium's supposedly highly influential anchors and correspondents. The media managers' staged settings for news events and prepared soundbites for news programs end up as the dominant elements on the television screen. Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Sam Donaldson delivered television reports day after day pointing out that Ronald Reagan relied on cue cards and took naps during meetings in the White House. Yet the newsmen had little influence on the views formed by their audience, who watched their president on television and decided for them-

selves whether they approved of him or not.

Television's highly visible and highly paid news personalities serve essentially as video page-turners and scene-setters, narrators who are comfortable and familiar to the viewer at home, but who are not particularly influential as opinion makers (which is why the popularity of television's anchormen and women depends more on their personal attractiveness, style and manner than on their intelligence, journalistic insight, or even their ability to write a coherent sentence).

It should come as no surprise that the campaigns' media professionals have figured out how to manipulate television's powerful view of reality for their own political ends. As Dayton Duncan, Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign press secretary, said, politicians "understood finally the importance of visual images and television in shaping national opinion. . . . By 1988 it was simply a matter of how well the two campaigns succeeded in getting their own soundbite on that night's news. . . . That became the context for everything else, written as well as television."

As we shall see, it is not difficult to figure out strategies that will counteract the manipulative efforts of the media professionals and restore the integrity of television's visual images of presidential campaigns.

With television giving the public a close-up, first-hand view of national political figures and major events, public opinion now tends to shape itself rather than, as conventional wisdom has it, be shaped largely by opinion makers. In other words, public opinion now tends to emerge from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Today, ". . . the prime controllers of long-term public opinion," according to sociologist Herbert J. Gans, "are the Americans I call bystanders," rather than "the politicians and other persuaders. . . . pundits. . . . columnists, commentators, experts, lobbyists, spin directors and flacks. . . ." People who, said Gans, "are normally politically uninvolved members of the general public," largely shape the national viewpoint on their own, through their perceptions which they derive mostly from television. The pundits may help people decide what to think about, but they no longer have much influence in helping people decide what to think. And television, which has been instrumental in making that happen, transmits the public's views nationally and instantaneously, by means of incessant polling that reflects and reports the public's views as news.

The result of this electronic exercise in direct democracy is government largely by popular consensus, with presidential candidates and the presidents themselves continually monitoring the polls both before and after every action they take. It is a process that feeds on and reinforces itself. The public finds out what to think about through television, makes up its mind based on what it sees on television, and then discovers what it is thinking by watching the polls on television.

With so much taking place in full view of the public, political compromise becomes difficult, issues tend to be polarized, opinions entrenched. Efforts to settle disagreement by splitting differences—the very essence of politics—are viewed as selling out principles passionately held by members of the electorate.

Ironically, while television enhances the visibility and the “bully pulpit” of the presidency, it has at the same time made it extremely difficult for presidents to lead. Their very visibility deprives them of policy options, narrows their room to maneuver and negotiate, and reduces the time they have to put their programs and people in place. It has been during the era of television’s dominance that we have had the first presidential resignation, and a succession of one term presidents. By contrast with earlier days, when presidents could lead the nation based on their own strong conviction and long term perspective, the tendency today is to follow public opinion as it is revealed in the polls. Someone recently commented, we now have government functioning too often according to the rules of *The Gong Show*. If people do not like what they see happening, they stop it dead in its tracks.

### ***Television’s Conventional Bias***

With television and the other traditional molders of opinion largely reacting to public opinion rather than shaping it, television’s tendency is to be unremittingly conventional in its approach to political ideas and personalities, which is why television rarely breaks major stories or plows new ground. In seeking to attract the largest possible audience all the time, commercial television cannot afford to veer from the path of mainstream thinking, or to advocate unpopular causes or radical ideas either of the left or right. It strives for objectivity and balance, which translates into mainstream orthodoxy. Television will not risk

alienating large segments of its mass audience which its advertisers pay so dearly to reach.

For this reason, television’s influence derives less from its ability to change people’s minds than from its ability to reinforce popular beliefs. It gives known incumbents a great edge over those who are trying to unseat them.

Television creates a difficult environment in which to launch new ideas or new faces, but it accelerates the visibility of ideas that already have begun to take hold. Every significant new political and social change of the last few decades—the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the anti-Vietnam movement, the rise of the evangelical right—was at first largely ignored by television, which then climbed on the bandwagon only after the movement reached a critical mass large enough to be acceptable to the nationwide audience. Television accelerates already existing trends by spreading them rapidly across the nation and, like the effect of the wind on the tide, increases their intensity and velocity, and then repeats the process with other popular trends that rise to take their place.

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### ***Mixing Politics with Entertainment and Advertising***

The public’s electronic view of the political world takes place in a television environment that is saturated with comedy, drama, violence, sexuality, gossip and commercial advertising, all designed for instant and easy appeal to the senses and emotions rather than to reason. With the networks serving as the principal battleground for presidential campaigns, the tone and character of those campaigns are inevitably shaped by the predominant cultural atmosphere of commercial television. It would be unrealistic to expect presidential campaigns to travel the high road of Jeffersonian reason and intellect on the increasingly low road of commercial television, whose mass entertain-

ment and commercial advertising are typified by Geraldo Rivera's sensationalism, *A Current Affair's* tabloid journalism, Morton Downey's jugular attack programming, and Linda Ellerbee's pseudo-newsroom style coffee commercials.

William Lee Miller, Professor of Ethics and Institutions at the University of Virginia, said after the 1988 campaign, "the merchandisers [have] take[n] over. They slice into the electorate in the lowest and least rational ways, and they do it in a cultural atmosphere dominated by television, which is in itself an aggressive engine of superficiality." With the blurring of the boundary lines that separate television entertainment from television news, political campaigning on television has taken on many of the characteristics of entertainment and advertising.

It has often been said that presidential candidates are marketed on television like toothpaste, soap, and Hollywood stars. In fact, advertisers use television to invest prosaic consumer products such as toothpaste and soap with the kinds of personality, glamour, sex appeal, and dramatic images that have been used in political campaigns to attract voters to presidential candidates. Whether, in fact, presidents are being sold like soap, or soap is being sold like presidents—advertising, marketing and image-making that employ metaphoric and instant emotional appeals rather than rational and high minded factual discussion, dominate the atmosphere of today's presidential politics.

### ***Greater Emphasis on Personal Politics***

The ability of all television viewers to experience presidential candidates up close and in the intimacy of the home, makes these figures less remote, exclusive and mysterious, and more familiar as individual human beings, than they have ever been before. Television, more than any other communications medium, merges the public leader with the private person. The result is to make politics personal to a degree never before possible on the national level.

In rare cases, where the candidate or national leader possesses a personal magnetism or charismatic star quality, television's effect is to heighten his romance and appeal, as with Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev. Most often, however, television's effect is to diminish

the romance and mystery of politics and politicians, whose very familiarity tends to undermine their ultimate authority as national leaders.

In *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz described how when people watch someone appearing on television, they tend to respond to facial expressions, mannerisms and body language more than they respond to words or communication of abstract facts, ideas and issues. When President Jimmy Carter decided to deliver what was billed as a crucial televised fireside chat about the energy crisis and his vision of the nation's future, viewers remarked

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on the fact that he wore a cardigan sweater more than they remembered the substance of his remarks.

In private life, one's first impression of a stranger is usually based on symbolic signposts—how he dresses, with whom he associates, where he lives, the way he earns his living, his religious and political affiliations. But after numerous personal encounters, lasting impressions are formed on the basis of the subject's personality, character, body language and individual mannerisms.

The television camera's unblinking, close-up view now makes available a web of intimate personal experiences and feelings about public figures and presidential candidates that once were confined to their intimate friends and immediate family. As Meyrowitz said, "Mystification and awe are supported by distance and limited access. [Television] reveals too much and too often for traditional notions of political leadership to prevail. The camera, unlike the raised platform, now brings the politician close for the people's inspection. . . [it] lowers politicians to the level of their audience."

While candidates try hard to structure the content of the media's coverage of their



campaigns, the form of the coverage itself changes our political perspective. Television's emphasis on image, action, and impression rather than ideas and thought, intensifies the focus on personality at the expense of the issues in presidential elections. The very intimacy of the screen make the candidate more important than the content of his or her campaign speeches. Television enables voters to get to know candidates regardless of what they say or what views they espouse. Thus, words and ideas, issues and policies have become far less important than personality and character in deciding who gets elected to the White House. The personal "horse race" has become the dominant theme of presidential campaign reporting.

This is not by any means a new phenomenon that television introduced to American politics. In the early 1800's, Toqueville commented, "The characteristics of the American

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journalist consist in an open and coarse appeal to the passions of his readers; he abandons principles to assail the character of individuals, to track them into private life and disclose all their weaknesses and vices." This, Toqueville observed, was by contrast to French journalists who have "a violent but frequently an eloquent and lofty manner of discussing the great interests of state." In the television age, the practice of "open and coarse appeal to the passions" and tracking candidates "into private life and disclos[ing] all their weaknesses and vices," has become an even more dominant theme that continues to prevail at the expense of "discussing the great interests of state."

One consequence of the heightened emphasis on personal appeal is that the ranks of presidential politics are open to outsiders whose

nationwide reputations have been made through television, rather than through the traditional political party hierarchy. National figures like the Reverends Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson build their own organizations that are loyal to themselves rather than to any political party and raise their own money without the help of the political parties. Television has given them the exposure they need to expand their constituencies and become credible presidential contenders. Television's impetus to direct democracy also means that what had been done rather discreetly behind closed doors by party leaders in "smoke filled rooms" is now carried on network television in full view of the public. The question that party brokers once asked of prospective candidates and of each other in the privacy of the backroom—"Is there anything in your past or in your private life that we should know?"—is now asked in public and seen by millions on television. Personal secrets have become public issues, as we saw so vividly during the 1988 campaign, with Gary Hart's womanizing, Joseph Biden's plagiarism, and Pat Robertson's child conceived out of wedlock. And rumor, gossip, and inuendo about personal lives have become high priority campaign weapons, as demonstrated by the mental illness rumors about Michael Dukakis and the extramarital affair press speculation about President Bush.

## SIX SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

### *Encourage the Television Alternatives*

Virtually all of the criticism of television's role in presidential elections centers on the performance of mainstream commercial television which has been the dominant media force for almost four decades, which continues to be the dominant force to this day, and which will continue to be the dominant force for the foreseeable future. Even though the nightly network news share of the audience has declined from 90% to 60% of the nation's viewers, the networks continue to be by far the most potent national media force. Today, however, there are a growing number of important television news and public affairs alternatives that offer significantly more thoughtful and intelligent dimensions of political information to expanding and influential audiences. Public

television and cable's C-SPAN and CNN came into their own during the presidential election of 1988. PBS and C-SPAN, in particular, examined campaign issues in depth and provided many hours of substantive programs and special election broadcasts, including thoughtful political background and analysis, live gavel-to-gavel coverage of the national conventions, campaigns, forums, speeches and other major appearances by the presidential and vice presidential candidates.

This coverage had more depth and dimension than the nine-second nightly news soundbite average for presidential candidates that largely characterized the mainstream network efforts. Public television's *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* and *Frontline* series, in particular, offered thorough, thoughtful and serious reporting that paradoxically paralleled the best the print press had to offer, largely because of their emphasis on the spoken word rather than live picture coverage.

It is essential that these alternative forms of television, especially public television and C-SPAN, be given the financial resources they need to enrich and expand upon their already influential presidential election coverage, as an important counterbalance to mainstream commercial broadcasting.

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### **Fixing The Primary System**

The rise of direct access politics, largely bypassing the traditional political party process, means that the people rather than the party bosses and party delegates now pick the presidential candidates. The rather irrationally and haphazardly scheduled system of state primaries and caucuses, which once served the narrow function of selecting convention delegates, has

in the television era taken on the much more important role of actually determining the top of each national ticket. It is a role for which the primary schedule is not well suited. Small and unrepresentative states like Iowa and New Hampshire, which hold the earliest caucuses and primaries and attract the lion's share of national coverage, take on significance out of all proportion to their size in determining which presidential candidates survive and which fail.

As long as the primaries served essentially as state delegate contests, while party bosses and delegates did the real work of picking the presidential candidates at the conventions, the peculiar sequence of the primaries and caucuses was of little consequence. Their importance escalated, however, when television helped turn state primaries and caucuses into the decisive testing ground for presidential aspirants, and turned the nominating conventions into vestigial events with no meaningful political purpose.

One ironic consequence of that change: The candidate who survives the majority of the individual state contests may not necessarily be the candidate who is best suited to win the national election. The primaries tend to attract intensely committed, ideologically motivated partisans who have the zeal to get organized early in the political game. They involve a high proportion of special interest voters who are less willing to compromise and bend to the general interest than is usually necessary in the general election. As a consequence, the primary battles are shaped disproportionately by candidates who represent politically polarizing factions, such as the Reverends Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson in 1988. As social scientist Gary Wills pointed out, it was Pat Robertson's hardline right-wing populist themes—morality, patriotism, anti-abortion, religion, toughness on crime—the so-called personal value issues of great emotional intensity, that set the basic tone for the 1988 campaign. These are the kinds of issues that play best in the image and emotion dominated environment of television, by contrast with the more traditional political pocketbook issues.

A major structural weakness of our presidential election system in the television age is the schedule of the state primaries and caucuses that determine the selection of the presidential candidates. The primaries and caucuses were not originally designed to take on such an important burden.

Many proposals have been advanced to

deal with the problem. Former FCC Chairman Newton Minow has urged a return to the selection of the national tickets by political pros and party officials who know the candidates best. Others have proposed that state primaries and caucuses be bunched into regional contests, or scheduled on a single national primary day in order to overcome the disproportionate influence of the early primary states. The goal is to have the primary process conform more closely than it does now to the population balance of the national election.

The reform that will best accomplish

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that goal, while preserving the present schedule of statewide contests (since states like New Hampshire and Iowa are determined not to relinquish their lucrative financial and publicity stakes in the current system), is to convert the early state primaries and caucuses into non-binding candidate popularity contests, rather than delegate selection contests. The actual selection of state delegates to the national conventions should be made instead in state primaries and caucuses held simultaneously throughout the nation on a single day in June.

Under this two-step process, which can be put into effect by the political parties themselves, dark horse candidates as well as front-runners could, if they wish, test their popular appeal, publicize their campaign themes, build their political organizations and earn federal campaign funds by entering the early primary and caucus popularity contests. Candidates would also have the option, however, to stay out of the early primaries and caucuses and instead enter the race later in the game because the results of the early state popularity contests would not be binding on the convention delegates who would be selected in June. By skipping all or part of the early rounds, a candidate would not necessarily foreclose his or her

chance to win the nomination.

Moreover, for the party without an incumbent president seeking reelection, it is unlikely that the one-day nationwide June primaries would produce a majority of delegates committed to a single presidential nominee. The result would be a meaningful national intraparty candidate competition likely to be decided on the floor of the convention in the summer, with state delegates and elected party leaders making the final selection.

This two-step process would combine the best of both worlds for long-shot presidential contenders and front runners alike. The states that run early popularity contest caucuses and primaries would have their own day in the spotlight. Yet no presidential aspirant would be required to rest all of his or her chances on entering the current arbitrary, patchwork quilt schedule of every state primary and caucus. Major contenders would have the choice of conserving their resources for the final nationwide push. And if no clearcut front runner were to emerge from the early popularity tests, the party would have the benefit of experienced, nationally representative state delegates selecting the best presidential nominee during its nationally televised convention.

### ***Overcoming the Soundbite Syndrome***

To offset the shallowness of the networks' nine second soundbite coverage and, in any event, to provide more depth, substance and clarity to their coverage of the issues, the networks should conduct extended live interviews with the major presidential and vice presidential candidates on their nightly news shows at regular intervals throughout the campaign. During the climactic final month of the campaign, the extended live candidate interviews should be scheduled weekly.

Each nightly news interview should run five to ten minutes long, a departure from the typical use of short pieces in the nightly news format, and should be live, spontaneous and unrehearsed. Candidates would, of course, be able to reject the network news invitations for interviews, but then his or her opponent could take advantage of the free nightly news television time to address the issues without competition. These interviews on regularly scheduled evening news programs would be exempt from equal time requirements, a necessity for the networks.

This simple step would have the impor-

tant effect of counteracting the quick soundbites, slick campaign commercials and staged candidate appearances. It would give the public meaningful opportunities to learn the candidates' views on major domestic and foreign policy issues, and to judge firsthand the character and qualifications of those who seek the nation's highest offices.

### ***Suspend the Equal Time Requirement***

Broadcasters are required by law to give comparable or, as it has come to be known, equal time on the air to every legally qualified candidate for office during election campaigns. To ensure fairness and balance, whenever any candidate appears on the screen all of his or her opponents are entitled to equal time. In most elections that are sufficiently important to be covered by television, numerous fringe party candidates, as well as the major contenders, are legally qualified to appear on the ballot. This originally imposed such an enormous equal time burden on broadcasters that the requirement was gradually whittled down to exempt all regularly scheduled news programs as well as the coverage of all campaign events, including the debates. Today, the equal time restriction applies only to special election documentaries that are not part of a continuing news series. Ironically, these are the very programs that are capable of providing viewers with the most useful and complete information about the candidates and issues. The result, instead of fairness to all candidates, is the complete disappearance from broadcast schedules of special election documentaries. No network or station will run hour-long prime time documentaries on the Democratic and Republican presidential tickets, only to risk having numerous fringe party candidates demand the equal time to which they are entitled.

To encourage the production of substantive and thoughtful election documentaries, which would also help offset the soundbites, paid commercials, and staged appearances that so dominate television today, Congress should suspend the equal time requirement for presidential and vice presidential campaigns. This will put the onus on the networks and stations to schedule major journalistic examinations of the presidential campaigns in prime time, outside the limited format of their regular news shows.

### ***Improving the Televised Debates***

Nationally televised debates between presidential and vice presidential candidates have become the centerpiece of recent election campaigns. There is inherent drama in pitting candidates directly against one another on a single platform. Debates can reveal much about the candidates' character as well as their positions on the issues. The debates have failed to live up to their potential, however, largely because the front-running candidates exercise too much control over their frequency and format. From 1964 through 1976 incumbent presidents made sure there were no debates at all. That could happen again. For the candidate who is behind, televised debates offer a dramatic chance to capture the lead. For the candidate who is ahead, debates are a great risk that could wreck the whole campaign. So much is at stake that the debates have become staged and choreographed pseudo events that reveal too little and disguise too much to be of significant use to the television viewers.

The extended live candidate interviews that we have proposed, as well as the increased number of analytical campaign documentaries that could be produced if the equal time requirement were suspended, will help put the televised debates themselves in a more suitable perspective.

In addition, presidential and vice presidential candidates should be required to participate in a minimum number of televised debates as a condition of accepting federal campaign funds. One bill introduced in Congress mandates four presidential debates and one vice presidential debate. The bill also requires that the debates be produced by independent groups rather than the political parties, and that a minimum of 30 minutes of each debate be devoted to direct discourse between the candidates. The latter two provisions undoubtedly go too far by intruding into the editorial content of the debates. But the basic requirement that candidates debate a minimum number of times as a condition of accepting federal campaign funds, will help ensure that the debates take place and also will help limit the amount of control that any candidate can exercise over the debate process. And the prospect is that the debates would become more spontaneous and substantive, and therefore more useful to the electorate than they have been in recent years.

ABC political analyst Jeff Greenfield argues against making federal campaign funds contingent on debate appearances on the grounds that such a requirement would be an improper infringement on the candidate's freedom to campaign as he or she sees fit. But the goal here is to encourage and expand robust political discussion, rather than to limit or censor it, and therefore this should be a step very much worth taking.

### ***Dealing with Attack Commercials***

Nothing has provoked more criticism in recent presidential campaigns than the proliferation of negative attack commercials that distort the facts and pollute the air. In 1988, the revolving prison door commercial, about a parolee who raped a woman while on leave from a Massachusetts jail during Michael Dukakis's gubernatorial term, became virtually a metaphor for the entire Bush campaign.

A number of bills have been introduced in Congress that either ban negative political advertising altogether, or require candidates to appear personally in any commercials that attack their opponents, or require television stations that run attack commercials bought by political action groups to offer free time for the opposition candidate to respond. These bills, if passed, would set a dangerous precedent. They restrict the candidates' freedom to speak. They censor the way campaigns can be conducted. And they open a Pandora's box of editorial definitions about which commercials should fall under the law's provisions and which should not.

A more appropriate way to deal with the problem, one that imposes no censorship and no editorial restrictions, would be to require presidential candidates who accept federal election financing to vouch personally and publicly for all their own commercials. That would serve at least to make all presidential candidates personally responsible for what their own campaign puts on the air. Similarly, candidates who accept federal campaign funds should also be required to endorse or repudiate publicly within a reasonable period after their broadcast, all commercials that are bought on their behalf by independent groups, supporters and political action committees. That should deter candidates from relying on surrogates to do their dirty work for them.

These requirements will not suppress

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*...require presidential candidates who accept federal election financing to vouch personally and publicly for all their own commercials.*

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negative or personal attack advertising. But as columnist David Broder said, "Such accountability requirements might make the candidates think twice about what they're putting on the air—and maybe clear the air of the worst of the pollution."

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Television's role in American presidential campaigns will change as political needs change, as channel capacity expands, as network dominance declines, and as new telecommunications technologies develop. By the next century, television itself may become so fragmented that, like radio, it will no longer be a nationally cohesive political and social force, and no longer be nearly as dominant in presidential elections as it is today. Whatever television's role will become in the future, however, two basic principles must be preserved:

1. Modern democracies require access to truly diverse outlets of information which should be available to all the people all the time; no government or small group of big corporations should ever be permitted to control the majority, or even a large proportion of our vital sources of information.

2. Information of all kinds should pass through those diverse outlets without restrictions or limits, so that the people can, in Lippmann's words, "acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs," which will help them elect presidents wisely and enable them to determine their own political destiny.