

THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE: CAMPAIGN CYNICISM AND "THE CANDIDATE"

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines the effect of viewing the popular motion picture "The Candidate" on attitudes about political campaigns. A post-movie sample of respondents was somewhat more cynical about campaigns than was a pre-movie sample, but this tendency was neither strong nor consistent. Post-movie respondents were, however, much more likely to cite such factors as candidate image and image manipulation as important determinants of electoral success.

Popular culture is often condemned by intellectual critics for its mindless escapism. Speculating on popular culture's political impact, scholars speak in terms of the "nullification of conscious mental processes" and the "narcotizing dysfunction." Nor are such dramatic metaphors necessarily ill-conceived; according to a recent study (reported in *Time*, April 10, 1972:47), habitual television viewers who try to "kick the habit" may experience such profound "withdrawal symptoms" as moodiness, child-spanking, wife-beating, extra-marital affairs and/or decreased sexual appetite.

(But in the midst of its predominantly escapist fare, popular culture often conveys many explicitly or implicitly political messages.) Country music, for example, though primarily concerned with the heartache and (less frequently) the joy of love, is oriented toward certain general values (self-reliance, patriotism) and specific political positions (anti-welfarism and marijuana-smoking). Likewise, television Westerns and whodunits, virtually identical save quirks of character and locale, carry both broad ideological appeals (desire for freedom, anti-bureaucratism) and more specific political stances (attitudes toward the use of violence) (see DiMaggio *et al.*, 1972; Golstein and Perrucci, 1963). If we can believe the accumulated evidence of a generation of content analysis, comic strips, soap operas, Hollywood movies, and other mass entertainments also purvey a diverse range of political information and argumentation.

(The important, but as yet largely unanswered question is: So what? So what if mass entertainment contains political messages, if these messages are not perceived—let alone acted upon?) Why content-analyze hit song lyrics when the vast majority of listeners are unaware of what these lyrics mean (Robinson and Hirsch, 1972)? (Indeed, why content-analyze even television network news programs when most viewers, polled only a few minutes after watching one, cannot recall as much as a single story (reported in *Time*, October 18, 1971:80)?) (What is the impact of mass entertainment's political content? Does watching the newly elected Linus sell his political principles down the river on a televised "Peanuts" special foster political cynicism in youth? Can viewing Dick Tracy or Joe Friday at work shape sentiments toward law enforcement? To what extent has "The Godfather" informed public opinion about organized crime? Has "All in the Family" helped legitimize racial bigotry?)

There can, in other words, be little doubt that popular culture conveys political values and outlooks, but precious little is known about the impact of this content. (This study attempts to take a modest step toward closing the research gap by examining the impact on political attitudes of one popular motion picture.) To be sure, many studies have focused on the impact of screen-mediated messages. In their examination of high school students' reactions to the anti-discrimination film "Don't Be a Sucker," for example, Cooper and Dinerman (1951)

could find no significant effect on levels of prejudice. Similarly, the Army-produced film "The Battle of Britain" was found to be ineffective at changing soldiers' attitudes toward the British and toward American participation in World War II (Howland *et al.*, 1949). (But these and other studies have dealt with outright propaganda rather than mass entertainment, and have avoided natural settings in favor of carefully controlled laboratory testing conditions.) Considering the broad array of defense mechanisms individuals employ to evade blatant propagandizing, as well as the difficulties of extrapolating laboratory-based findings to complex "real world" situations, this body of previous research can only tenuously be applied to the question of the political impact of mass entertainment movies.

Campaigns and "The Candidate"

(With the advent of "the new politics," the function of political campaigning is often said to be shifting from the communication of political substance toward the communication of candidate style and image (Nimmo, 1970). This has occasioned a profound concern for the integrity of campaigning on the part of critics who raise the Orwellian specter of a small fraternity of "image merchants" who are able to "manipulate" the American electorate by "packaging and selling" candidates like bars of soap or cans of deodorant.)

One recent American motion picture "The Candidate" has been hailed as "a handbook for today's image-conscious politics" (Life, July 28, 1972:45). In "The Candidate," Bill McKay, an idealistic and socially-conscious young legal aid worker, is convinced to enter a Senate race against a slick, pseudo-cornball professional politician incumbent (Gans, 1973:76). Strong stands on issues are transformed to meaningless pap as McKay's image-makers take and lighten the reins. McKay the image manages to win the election, but McKay the man is lost somewhere along the campaign trail; at movie's end, the candidate—secure in

his victory—is able only to turn to the political professionals controlling him and ask, "What do we do now?" (The picture's thesis, then, is that:

... a decent, intelligent man can go through the American political campaign process, manage not to say anything and have his idealism, firmly established when he entered politics, computerized into bland squares of nothing, expelled over television with the impact, and the harmlessness, of a tissue commercial. (Bahrenburg, 1972:36.)

Ultimately, however, as Herbert Gans (1973:76) has written, the real issue raised by "The Candidate" "... is not the personally destructive nature of an American election campaign, but what happens to the political process ... during an election, and what possibilities for reform remain after the election is won." About these prospects for reform, the movie offers a counsel of despair: in the blunt language of several of the movie's principals, "Politics is bull-hit."

Can movies like "The Candidate" affect opinions about important political issues? As even some of its severest critics admitted, "The Candidate" does have an unmistakable aura of reality about it, enhanced by actual newsreel footage of several prominent Democrats and cameo appearances by television newsmen. Indeed, a test audience to which "The Candidate" was shown by its producers testified overwhelmingly that the movie presents "a truthful picture of campaigning" (Bahrenburg, 1972:253). On the other hand, like most Hollywood movies, "The Candidate" was intended primarily as an entertainment. As McKay, it starred the popular actor Robert Redford, who had attained something of a cult hero status for his earlier portrayal of "The Sundance Kid" in a successful Western. Throughout, it emphasized entertainment values to the point, some critics charged, that while it was a "good, glossy, grade-B entertainment," it often sacrificed substance for humor, sophistication for ex-

citement (see Zimmerman, 1972; Gilliat, 1972).

Is the political content of such a film even perceived, or does the entertainment function obscure the movie's political content? Even if political content is perceived, is it taken seriously? In order to begin answering these questions, we undertook a project designed to explore the impact of "The Candidate" on attitudes toward political campaigns. Research was conducted at a theater in Lubbock, Texas, where "The Candidate" was playing in its third week, approximately one month before the 1972 Presidential election. A small team of interviewers stationed in front of the theater approached people leaving the 7:00 P. M. feature or arriving for the 9:00 P. M. feature. Methodological choices were dictated in large measure by the habits of the theatergoers, who tended to arrive in the nick of time and to depart as though driven by a bomb scare. As a result, both the number of questions and the size of the sample (particularly those who were leaving the theater) had to be severely limited. Because turnout was light on all three nights sampled, the strategy was simply to interview as many people as possible in the short time available. Interviewers recorded respondents' sex, race, and approximate age, as well as their answers to four oral questions.

Each sample—"pre-movie" and "post-movie" subjects—was composed primarily of white, college-age couples, who (according to the theater manager) formed the bulk of the audience for "The Candidate" during its run in Lubbock, a university town. While they were by no means randomly selected, there is every indication that our subjects were in fact representative of the audience for the movie, at least in one specific locale.¹

As a first approach to gauging the impact of "The Candidate," subjects were asked to respond along a six-point agree-disagree continuum to each of three statements. The first statement was adapted from an existing scale of political cynicism (Agger *et al.*,

1961), while the second two were specially constructed for the present study. The mean responses, presented in Table 1, reveal some interesting trends. In the first place, the movie clearly did not cause a wholesale transformation of political attitudes. There was no significant difference between pre- and post-movie subjects on Statement 1. Statistically significant before-after differences did emerge on Statements 2 and 3, but these changes (0.82 for Statement 2 and 0.69 for Statement 3) were of moderate magnitude—representing less than a one-point difference on a six-point scale.

But not only was the attitudinal impact of viewing the movie quite moderate; inspection of Table 1 also reveals that the movie's effect on cynicism was anything but consistent. People who had not viewed the picture were already quite willing to agree that candidates make basic compromises and undesirable commitments—leaving little room for the movie to cause changes toward greater cynicism on Statement 1. Statement 2, which focused on the movie's central theme, the importance of a candidate's image for his electability, elicited a significant before-after difference in the direction of greater cynicism among the post-movie sample. Statement 3 also elicited significantly different before and after responses—but this time in the direction of *less* cynicism among those who had viewed the picture. Why this change toward a less cynical response should have occurred is not immediately evident, though it must be remembered that McKay, the movie's attractive, intelligent hero, did, after all, win the election; especially in light of the movie's unappetizing portrayal of McKay's opponent, it seems reasonable to speculate that viewers felt that an intelligent choice between candidates had in fact been made.²

Subjects were also asked to indicate what seemed to them to be the single most significant factor determining whether a candidate for high public office would be elected.³ Replies to this question were quite

TABLE I
PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPAIGNS,
PRE-AND POST-MOVIE SAMPLES

A. Statement 1: "In order to get elected, most candidates for public office have to make basic compromises and undesirable commitments."			
Mean Cynicism Score, Before	(n=76)	4.68	
Mean Cynicism Score, After	(n=36)	4.61	t=.330
B. Statement 2: "Nowadays, a candidate's looks seem to be as important as his beliefs in determining whether he'll be elected."			
Mean Cynicism Score, Before	(n=77)	3.06	
Mean Cynicism Score, After	(n=36)	3.88	t=2.59 ^b
C. Statement 3: "Political campaigns do a good job of helping voters make an intelligent choice between candidates."			
Mean Cynicism Score, Before	(n=77)	4.00	
Mean Cynicism Score, After	(n=35)	3.31	t=2.01 ^b

^aScores may range from 1.00 to 6.00. For each statement, the higher the score, the more cynical the response. Agreement with Statements 1 and 2 and disagreement with Statement 3 were considered cynical responses.

^b.05 > p.

diverse, but we were able to group them under seven headings. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that pre-movie subjects were much more likely to cite a constellation of factors with high normative value in the American political culture. Elections, according to traditional norms, ought to be decided on the basis of a candidate's stands on policy issues, his qualifications, and his human virtues. Indeed, more than two-thirds (67.6%) of the pre-movie sample averred that issues, qualifications, or virtues are *in fact* the primary determinants of electoral success. By contrast, fewer than half (44.4%) of those who had seen "The Candidate" named any of these traditional factors. Table 2 also indicates that proportionately almost twice as many (38.9% to 22.1%) post-movie as pre-movie subjects cited candidate image or image manipulation as determining factors. In short, this evidence suggests that viewing "The Candidate" both alerted subjects to the operation of "image politics" and performed something

of a "demythologizing" function, perhaps weakening some traditional notions about electoral success.

Of course, the present study uses a spoon to move a mountain; rather than assessing the broad dimensions of popular culture's political impact, it gauges, in a preliminary way, the immediate impact of viewing one motion picture on certain political attitudes possessed by a restricted segment of the population. Studies of the immediate impact of popular culture should be conducted with differently constituted samples and assessment devices in different regions of the country; they should consider the effects of, say, movies with both more and less clear and conventional political themes. Most importantly, they should examine the *long-range* effects of such motion pictures. Hopefully, this exploratory study will stimulate other researchers to attempt similar, and more ambitious, analyses of the politics of popular culture.

TABLE 2

FACTORS DETERMINING CANDIDATE SUCCESS,
PRE- AND POST-MOVIE SAMPLES^a

Response Categories	Pre-Movie Sample	Post-Movie Sample
A. Candidate Stands on Issues (e.g. platform, issues, economy)	33.8% (26)	19.4% (7)
B. Candidate Qualifications (e.g. experience, leadership, qualifications)	14.3 (11)	5.6 (2)
C. Candidate Virtues (e.g. honesty, sincerity, morality)	19.5 (15)	19.4 (7)
D. Candidate Image (e.g. image, media appeal, charisma)	15.6 (12)	25.0 (9)
E. Image Manipulation (e.g. P.R., publicity, ability to pull a snow job)	6.5 (5)	13.9 (5)
F. Organization (e.g. party, money, group support)	3.7 (3)	5.6 (2)
G. Miscellaneous (e.g. popular vote, the popular thing) or No Opinion	6.5 (5)	11.1 (4)
TOTAL	100.0% (77)	100.0% (36)

^aActual question wording: "What do you think is the single most important factor determining whether a candidate for high office will be elected?"

FOOTNOTES

¹The underlying conservatism of both Lubbock residents and university students ought to be noted. In the 1972 election, Nixon polled in the vicinity of 80% of each group's vote.

²Two comparisons suggest that the audience for "The Candidate" was neither unusually high nor low in its level of cynicism about political campaigns before viewing the movie. First, a study by Jack Dennis (1970) turned up roughly similar attitudes toward elections

among Wisconsin adults. Second, a survey of students in the first author's introductory American government course revealed cynicism scores which were virtually identical to those of the "pre-movie" sample. This suggests that some sort of audience pre-selection process was *not* in effect.

Because of the homogeneity of the samples, analysis of race- and age-related differences was not possible. No significant differences between the sexes could be found, a result which is also consistent with that reported by Dennis (1970).

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