From *Dirty Little Secrets*

Among the many "dirty little secrets" that taint American politics today, Larry Sabato and Glenn Simpson focus here on the technique of push-polling, a new and ugly campaign tactic. While seeming to be a candidate poll seeking voter opinion, the push-poll is really a device to communicate innuendoes that smear the opponent. Sabato and Simpson go on to explain the sophisticated telephone technology that makes techniques like push-polling possible. In case students don't fully grasp the impact of these messages, Sabato and Simpson close with an example—an actual script from Florida's 1994 gubernatorial campaign.

Oh, the telephone is now a very evil technique.

—Republican pollster Frank Luntz, November 1994

The one thing I see repeatedly is the total abuse of the phone. It's really running rampant and getting worse.

—Democratic consultant Joe Trippi, August 1995

PERKS, AND THE ABUSE OF THEM, are both as old as Congress, although the nature of the abuse has evolved considerably. But both major political parties make use of new technology, too, and not just in developing sophisticated direct-mail operations. Computerized telephone banks, made available to the candidates by the professional beneficiaries of big-money politics—the for-hire campaign consultants—have begun to make their mark. While consultants have a separate profit motive, they share with candidates a steely determination to do whatever it takes to win.

During every campaign season, a great deal of attention is properly devoted to condemning misleading television advertisements and nasty direct-mail letters. But "push-polling" has largely been ignored, even though it has become the rage in American campaigns, to the detriment of both civility and the truth. It was a factor most recently in Iowa during the 1996 Republican Caucus, when candidate Steve Forbes accused the Bob Dole campaign of tactics akin to those discussed [here]. Unless aggressive action is taken, this difficult-to-catch form of political sleaze threatens to drag our already debased electioneering even lower.

The push-poll operates under the guise of legitimate survey research to spread lies, rumors, and innuendo about candidates. Hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of voters were telephoned and push-polled during the 1994 elections. This effort dramatically increased the degree of negativity in American politics. Many voters and observers were disgusted and enraged by the tactic, but sleaze telephoning can work efficiently and effectively—and so, unless exposed and checked, it is bound to become standard ammunition in campaign arsenals across the United States. . . .

. . . *A push-poll is a survey instrument containing questions which attempt to change the opinion of contacted voters*, generally by divulging negative information about the opponent which is designed to *push* the voter away from him or her and *pull* the voter toward the candidate paying for the polling. In other words, push-polling is *campaigning under the guise of research*. This operational definition parallels the push-poll used by businesses, "sugging"—selling under the guise of a telephone research poll products or publications. But the push-poll is actually several forms of public opinion surveying and targeted voter contact, some legitimate and others dismaying.

The most common and defensible type is an adjunct to "opposition research," a campaigner's effort to learn about the opponents' record and discover what might reduce public support for them. Commonly, a pollster working for a candidate will pre-test positive and negative campaign themes in a random-sample public opinion survey by telephone early in the campaign season. Voters will be asked for their reactions to the virtues and the vices of the major-party candidates, including some blemishes that may not yet be publicly known. For instance, in a standard research push-poll, a respondent (that is, a citizen called by the pollster) is often read a relatively fair, paragraph-long biographical description of each candidate and asked which contender he or she supports. Then additional information is added, question by question, to test the voter's commitment, and to assess what issues might "push" a voter away from his or her initial choice. For example,

If you learned that [Candidate A] has voted for six tax increases in the state legislature, would this make you more or less likely to support her?

If you learned that [Candidate B] opposes a woman's right to choose an abortion, would this make you more or less likely to support him?

Some push-polls give voters several choices for answers: "Would this make you a great deal *more* likely to support him, somewhat *more* likely, somewhat *less* likely, a great deal *less* likely, or would it not make any difference to you?" In this way, a campaign can prepare itself by determining which assaults actually move opinion. Naturally, the candidate wants to know what will work or whether his ammunition is mostly blanks. One well-known national political pollster, Frederick/Schneiders, Inc. (FSI), even advertises its "extensive use" of this type of push-poll in a promotional brochure given to prospective clients: "Every poll is a mini campaign. Respondents are exposed to candidate information during a poll the same way they will be during the campaign. By testing which set of information 'stimuli' best produces a maximum vote for the client, FSI polls provide a clear picture of where a race is going and how to get there, not just where it stands today."

The information contained in research-oriented push-polls is fact-based and essentially true (even if presented in a blunt and exaggerated partisan style). The primary goal of this type of push-poll is to obtain the

unbiased views of voters, not necessarily to turn the respondents off to the opponent. The respondents are "pushed" to determine what the campaign may need to do to change the image of the opponent, and the negative issues being tested in the survey will probably be ones easily transferable to public, on-the-record attacks made during the campaign (using television advertising, direct mail, or simple stump speeches). . . .

But even this "legitimate" manifestation of push-polling can be troubling. Such a survey may reach 400 to 1,500 respondents in a relatively small geographic area (say, a compact congressional district), and negative personal information about a freely discussed candidate with this many people can quickly become fodder for a districtwide gossip mill. Professional pollsters may object to this characterization. If a survey asks questions about issues or character that portray both candidates in a negative light, they reason that the research poll does no harm. However, they evaluate questions on the basis of their professional perspective—here, the goal is questionnaire balance and unbiased survey results. The trouble is that even balanced surveys yielding unbiased responses will disseminate negative information. This adversely affects the tenor and character of the campaign, and adds to the rampant negativism of modern politics.

Such information is still more worrisome if it is exaggerated or outright false, as is frequently the case with a second type of push-poll, the so-called agenda-driven survey, also known as deliberative polling. Here the pollster is still conducting a random-sample telephone survey with a representative group of voters, but the goal has changed. The agenda is to produce a favorable horse race result for the client-candidate, so that potential contributors and the press can be apprised of the candidate's "impending victory." The technique does not always work, but donors want to give hard-earned dollars to a likely winner, and the news media love to publish and air horse race polls. With a little luck, such a poll could create a bandwagon effect for the leading candidate. A good example of this "agenda-driven" push-poll can be found in Missouri's Fifth Congressional District race in 1994. A loaded survey taken in September by Republican pollster Frank Luntz for GOP nominee Ron Freeman produced an eight percentage point lead for Freeman over Democratic nominee Karen McCarthy for an open seat. Yet on election day McCarthy won easily (56.6 percent to 43.4 percent), despite the overall GOP tide. There may actually be little or no real "bandwagon effect," but politicians and consultants *believe* there is such a thing and strive to create it by looking like a winner.

They do so by providing the respondents with loads of derogatory background on the opponent. Before respondents are asked how they will vote, they may be read biographical sketches heavily biased against the opponent. The client may be portrayed as Mother Teresa and the opponent painted as one step away from the sheriff's manacles. Sometimes the poll asks a series of questions incorporating damaging assertions about the opponent. Often the worst is saved for last, culminating in the classic horse race question, "If the election were held today, would you vote for [Candidate A] or [Candidate B]?" Not surprisingly, at this point a sizable plurality tends to favor the unsullied client. The "good news" numbers are triumphantly released, with no mention of the poll format or non–horse race questions. And gullible contributors open their wallets; undiscerning journalists, usually the more inexperienced press persons, write the desired headlines; and the hundreds of voter-respondents may talk to family and friends about the shocking (though perhaps false) information they have learned about a prominent politician. Thus, the ripple effects can be far-reaching. . . .

The first two types of push-polls seem almost harmless when compared with the third form, called "negative persuasive" or "advocacy phoning." This push-poll is not really a poll at all, but a form of targeted voter contact and canvassing, since no random sample of the population is selected. Instead, the emphasis is on volume: as many voters in a target population as possible (union members, gun owners, conservative Christians, or whatever) are contacted with a highly negative message that is short—even a minute or less—and asks no demographical background information on the respondents. First, respondents are asked which candidate they favor. If the client-candidate is chosen, the respondent is thanked and placed on the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) list for election day. But if the respondent picks the opponent or says she is undecided, then a torrent of negativity is unleashed: "Would you still support this if you learned that he [is a tax-evader, a baby-killer, or shoots newborn puppies for sport]?" As one frank push-pollster put it on background, "What you're trying to do is mobilize voters *against* a candidate. . . . You're taking a specific audience and literally telling them why they shouldn't be voting for somebody."

The target audience can be voters in swing districts, or even voters in the opponent's areas of greatest strength. In both cases, push-pollsters are attempting to persuade voters that the opponent is not worthy of their backing and thereby *suppressing* his turnout. This "suppression phoning" is the reverse of a form of GOTV called "positive persuasive phoning," which delivers favorable information about the candidate-client to any

respondent who is undecided. Obviously, this positive phoning is far preferable ethically to the negative variety, but this once-dominant kind of GOTV is being supplanted in many areas by attack push-polling. But like GOTV, it is done largely in the final weeks or days of a campaign—when the rush of events makes it least likely to be detected or exposed by the opposition or the press. Naturally, the harshest and most untruthful messages are saved for election eve or the weekend prior to Election Day, according to several telephone-bank consultants we interviewed. And, of course, the beauty of this ugly technique is stealth. Unless, by some wild circumstance, a respondent has his phone fitted with a recording device and has the presence of mind to turn on the tape as the interview begins, or someone on the inside talks, there is no way to find fingerprints and fix blame. . . .

The scale and telephone technology of push-polling are new; the concept itself, and the depths to which it can descend, are unfortunately not. It will surprise few to learn that Richard Nixon, whose lack of an ethical compass eventually resulted in his presidency's destruction, was one of push-polling's pioneers. In his very first campaign, a successful 1946 run for the U.S. House against Democratic incumbent Jerry Voorhis, Democratic voters throughout his district reported receiving telephone calls that began, "This is a friend of yours, but I can't tell you who I am. Did you know that Jerry Voorhis is a Communist?" at which point the caller hung up. While no firsthand evidence was produced to link the Nixon campaign directly with the calls, at least one individual has come forward admitting that she worked for Nixon at $9 a day, in a telephone-bank room where the attack calls were made. The technique, according to distinguished Nixon biographer Stephen E. Ambrose, was well-suited to the "vicious, snarling . . . dirty" Nixon campaign, which "was full of half-truths, full lies, and innuendoes, hurled at such a pace that Voorhis could never catch up with them."

Nixon was not alone in his use of gutter tactics, of course, but for decades this kind of negativity was regularly and roundly condemned by the press and most political professionals. It may be a commentary on our times that this is no longer so. In fact, candidates, parties, and consultants sometimes brag openly about their excursions into sleaze, once the campaign is over. In 1986, for example, the Democrats and their allies in the labor unions undertook massive negative persuasive phoning just before the midterm congressional elections that saw a Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate restored after six years of GOP rule. The telephone message centered upon the Reagan administration's supposed plans to undermine and reduce funding for Social Security—a highly suspect allegation that nonetheless appeared to do the trick, according to strategists for both parties. This episode has been repeatedly cited by Democrats as a clever tactic to employ in the years since. Perhaps not incidentally, the Social Security push-poll against Republicans has continued to be a mainstay of Democratic "outreach" to senior citizens until the present day. Many of the 1994 Republican congressional candidates we interviewed complained about it.

Over a hundred political consulting firms specializing in persuasive phoning have sprung up over the past two decades. For example, 154 telephone firms offering political "direct contact" services were listed by *Campaigns and Elections* magazine, a well-known trade journal for consultants and aspiring officeholders, in a publication released in February 1995. The new technology of computer-aided telephoning and target selection has made the process of political and commercial marketing by phone vastly easier and more efficient. A single operator can make 80 to 100 *completed* calls with a short message *each evening hour*, at a cost (depending on message length and company) of $0.45 to $1.30 per call. In other words, a quarter million targeted calls can be made for $112,000 to $325,000—arguably a solid investment for a multimillion-dollar statewide campaign that is probably spending many times that on diffuse television advertising. . . .

The proliferation of telephone marketing technology and the firms that sell it not only fills a campaign need but creates one. The firms' aggressive entrepreneurs—another variety of the ubiquitous political consultants that specialize in attack politics—advertise the technology's availability, and also ignite the latent fear in every campaign manager that the other side may be employing the technique already. (This same psychology once fueled the superpowers' arms race.)

Take Mac Hansbrough, the pleasant and forthcoming president of Washington, D.C.–based National Telecommunications Services, whose clients have included the Democratic National Committee, abortion-rights groups, and various Democratic candidates. Hansbrough wrote a remarkably candid 1992 article, "Dial N for Negative," in *Campaigns and Elections*. Calling negative phoning "the single most important and cost-effective communications tool a campaign can employ" and predicting its widespread use in the 1990s, Hansbrough correctly suggested that the technique would "take its place beside negative television, radio, and direct mail as a necessary tool in the . . . consultant's arsenal." And he cited the "lack of spill-over" as one vital reason why:

One can deliver different messages to multiple groups of voters with little chance that one group will receive the other's message or that the larger constituency of uncalled voters will receive any of the messages. This is a major advantage when controversial issues are being discussed, and it is an advantage that TV and radio cannot offer. . . .

Negative phoning leaves few footprints. TV and radio ads can be heard by anyone and are often reported in the newspaper. Direct mail is available to find its way into anyone's hands and has the lasting effect that goes with all printed matter. Phone calls, of course, are verbal. Scripts are tightly controlled and rarely get out to the press, general public, or opponents. Phone calls are the true communications stealth technology of the future.

In follow-up interviews, Hansbrough told us that in his experience, negative phoning was most likely to occur in a close campaign, where a desperate candidate is hard-pressed and increasingly willing to do whatever it takes to win: "You use a negative approach only when you have to, and in my opinion, you only have to when you are very sure or reasonably sure that you may be losing the election." Even in these cases, though, candidates—fearing a backlash or a damaging news story—usually desire a buffer between their campaigns and the telephoning. So the sponsorship is passed to the national or state party committee, or a friendly allied group (say, a labor union for a Democratic nominee or a conservative organization for a Republican nominee). In some cases, a separate front vehicle is actually invented, such as "Citizens for Tax Fairness" or a neutral-sounding polling research company. (See the negative persuasion phoning scripts . . . which have been used in a recent campaign by Hansbrough clients.) However, Hansbrough stressed that whatever the sponsorship, the campaign controls the message, and the final scripting normally is approved by it. Hansbrough freely admits that most of the calling occurs at the election's last minute, and that there is much hand-wringing about the practice in many campaigns. But if the race is tight enough, the doubts are usually resolved *in favor* of negative phoning. Adds Hansbrough: "There's another good reason for doing it late: . . . negative campaigning is controversial [so] don't stir it up until you have to," or until it is likely the press will not pick up on the tactic until the election is over.

Two examples of these negative persuasion phoning scripts are reproduced [here]. These scripts were used by the campaign of Florida Democratic Governor Lawton Chiles, a Hansbrough client, in his successful 1994 reelection bid against Republican Jeb Bush, son of former President George Bush. After the election, Republicans claimed that Chiles's narrow victory (65,000 votes out of 4.2 million cast) was due to these negative

telephone scripts, read to tens of thousands of Floridians shortly before the election.

NEGATIVE PERSUASION PHONING: TWO EXAMPLES

SCRIPT 1

Hello, this is [interviewer's name] calling on behalf of the Florida Association of Senior Citizens.
We are calling to let you know that [Republican nominee for governor] Jeb Bush is no friend of seniors.
Bush's running mate has advocated the abolition of Social Security and called Medicare a welfare program that should be cut.
We just can't trust Jeb Bush and [lieutenant governor nominee] Tom Feeney.
Thank you and have a good day/evening.

SCRIPT 2

Hello, my name is [interviewer's name] calling from the Citizens for Tax Fairness.
I am calling to remind you that unlike thousands of your fellow citizens, Jeb Bush failed to pay local and state taxes and he has profited at the taxpayers' expense from business deals involving failed savings and loan properties. Mr. Bush doesn't play by the same rules like the rest of us and we want to make sure you are aware of this before you cast your vote on Tuesday.
Thank you and have a good day/evening.

Source: Scripts were provided by Mac Hansbrough. The campaigns using them were not identified by Hansbrough. But a year after the November 1994 election, these scripts became the center of controversy in Florida, where Republicans claimed they unfairly attacked Jeb Bush and helped to reelect Democratic Governor Lawton Chiles.

Negative phoning is just the latest, and perhaps nastiest, extension of the harsh tone of modern American politics. The technique "is effective because voters are much more prepared today to believe negative things about candidates than they once were. Negative TV ads, radio, direct mail, and news coverage have really paved the way" for negative phoning,

assess Hansbrough. Sleaze and cynicism do indeed feast at each other's table, as push-polling is proving anew.