

Hiding in Plain Site: Why don't reporters talk to voters?

Written by Chris Daly

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CHRIS DALY, FEB 15 2008

As it turns out, the big story so far from the American presidential campaign is the turnout. Evidence is mounting that U.S. voters are shaking off their customary apathy and voting in record numbers. Not only that, the surge of extra voters is clearly tilted in favor of the Democrats, a trend that may be setting the stage for a Democratic landslide in November.^[i]

But all this is very hard to discern from the political reporting. As usual, the vast preponderance of the campaign coverage is focused elsewhere – on the candidates, on campaign spending, on tactics, on endorsements, on all the usual fuss and trappings of campaign coverage.

It's not hard to understand why. Those things are fun to cover and easy to write (or blog) about. I know a bit about this, having covered past U.S. presidential campaigns in 1988 (for the Associated Press) and in 1992 and 1996 (for the *Washington Post*). When you're on the campaign trail, you are looking at the world as if through a straw, and all you can see is what's right in front of you.

When a candidate thinks about actually campaigning for president, the U.S. suddenly looks like a very big country. It is almost 3,000 miles across. It has 50 metropolitan areas with more than 1 million population.^[ii] It has 30 or more major TV markets.^[iii] So, the candidates have to keep moving. If you are a political reporter, it's a non-stop world of hotels, airports, and "events." Life is exciting, high-tech, and glossy. You meet a lot of bright, articulate, ambitious people. (If they have any connection to television, they are also unnaturally attractive.) The candidates and their top strategists are your universe.

Those people are accessible (within limits), and they have "quotable" things to say. If you ask them a question, they don't say they have to think about it. They don't say they'll get back to you. And they never say "I don't know." Instead, they say something quotable; they deliver the goods.

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The candidates themselves are (usually) charming, sometimes even glamorous. They DO things – give speeches, travel, hold debates, check in and out of hotels. If you hang around them for about two seconds, most of them will learn your name (they are unnaturally good at this sort of thing, of course, or else they would never make it in politics.) The next thing you know, Hillary or Mitt or John is asking about your kids.

Or, consider the fuss over endorsements. Political reporters are suckers for them, as evidenced by the fact that reporters almost always give endorsements excessive coverage. Look at the recent endorsement of Obama by Ted Kennedy and his niece, Caroline. For 48 hours or so, it dominated the coverage, evoking comparisons between the young senator Barack Obama and the young senator Jack Kennedy. But, even in Kennedy's home state of Massachusetts, his endorsement did not translate into a victory for Obama. The people heard all the hoopla and shrugged, but no one was paying attention to the people.

In any election, the candidates are only half the story, at most. The business of politics, by definition, involves the *relationship* between candidates and the electorate. Yet, almost all the coverage focuses on only one party, or one side of the equation – the politicians. The people who cover politics rarely cover the people.

Again, it's not hard to understand why. The fact is, a lot of regular people are harder to talk to. For one thing, when most people are approached by a reporter, they are not ready with a "quote." A lot of people, when approached by a total stranger, won't say much of anything, at least at first. You have to hang around a while. You have to bring topics up over and over again, probe and wait. It's time-consuming, even tedious.

This is why when reporters are in planning sessions with the top editors, they rarely pipe up and say, "Hey, I'm going to go hang around with a bunch of nobodies for a while, and if I come up with anything, I'll let you know." That is hardly the ticket to Page 1. Far better to say, "Hey, I just got talked to Hillary's top guy, and he tells me..."

One recent day's coverage is typical. On January 15, during the run-up to the Super Tuesday primaries, the *New York Times* carried eight staff-written stories about the presidential campaign, which was commendable. But only one of them was based on interviews with actual voters. All the rest dealt with candidates, their staffs, or staged events.

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Obviously, political reporters should get out of the bubble, cancel the next flight, and go talk to people, ordinary people. They should go to bus depots (nobody in America rides an inter-city bus if they can afford any alternative). They should go to bowling alleys. They should go to someplace they do not usually go with their own family and friends. (Heck, most reporters would learn a lot if they just stood outside an office building in the rain and talked to the smokers who are gathered there.)

They also need to acknowledge that in many cases, they are venturing across a culture gap. Almost all the members of the press corps are college graduates, and most of them are in middle or upper-middle class. They are no longer considered blue-collar, and fewer and fewer are union members. That is one reason that they feel like foreign correspondents when they report on ordinary people.

One special problem reporters have in covering voters has to do with age. News media executives are obsessed with young people – with their high-tech toys, their culture, and their looks. (This is because advertisers care about young people). But young people do not vote. Or, they do not vote in numbers proportionate to their numbers. Old people vote. They “out-vote” young people. But old people are considered boring, so they are not covered in anything like their fair share.

Another problem that bedevils the coverage has to do with class. American journalists are schooled in the belief that the United States is a classless society. So, they usually ignore class and focus instead on religion, gender, race.

One example: the *Times* presented a recent (Jan. 30) snapshot of the social make-up of the voters who cast ballots in the Florida Republican primary. The only indicator of social class was “income.” But income is not the same as wealth. Often, income is inadequate as a marker of wealth and can be down-right misleading. In Florida, for example, a lot of those Republican voters are retirees. They are no longer big earners. But a lot of them have significant wealth – in the form of real estate, big boats, or investment portfolios. They don't need a lot of income, but they are still well-to-do.

To be fair, it should be noted that once in a while, political reporters do get out and talk to people. A very small number of news organizations even recognize voters as a “beat”^[iv] – at least from time to time. At the *Washington Post*, for example, the old warhorse David Broder can be counted on to get off the campaign trail for a while and go

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ring some doorbells. But usually, such coverage is sporadic. It is almost never anyone's regular territory. So there is no continuity, no real methodology, and almost no follow-up.

For example, a lot of reporters tried to get a handle on South Carolina in advance of the voting in the Democratic primary there on Jan. 26. In that Southern state, a majority of Democratic voters are black. A slightly bigger majority are women. So, reporters asked: What are black women thinking? Do they support their fellow woman, Hillary? Or, do they support their fellow black, Barack? Did they listen to Barack's endorsement by Oprah Winfrey? Or did they listen to Hillary's endorsement by her husband, the man called our "first black president"?

In search of black women, reporters descended on the hair salons of South Carolina. (Like many personal-care businesses, these appear to be spontaneously segregated along racial lines.) That was fine, as far as it went. But most reporters went ONCE. After that, they began obeying one of the iron laws of journalism: Been there, done that. No one has gone back to South Carolina.

It may be objected that the big media and the elite press corps keep their finger on the pulse of the people through polling. Every election, more polls are conducted, analyzed, and commented on than ever. Doesn't that count?

Well, yes and no. For one thing, a lot of the polling that gets done in presidential elections is conducted by the different campaigns, for their own purposes. The results are often leaked, selectively, to favored reporters, always with the ulterior motive of making the candidate look good or harming some rival.

Then there are the polls that are commissioned, designed, and paid for by the media themselves. These are better, to be sure, but they still have their limits. They are not very good, for example, at gauging the *intensity* of people's feelings about a candidate or an issue. They rarely include open-ended questions, which would allow the voters to express what's on their minds; instead, voters are asked pointed questions about what's on the pollsters' minds.

Polls are also not very good at measuring humor, which sometimes drives popular feelings. And they are not well suited to probing about subtle, ambivalent, or complicated attitudes.

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In a sense, political reporters are similar to business reporters, especially the ones who cover markets. In the stock market, for example, the prices of stocks are driven by the uncoordinated actions of millions of investors. (Indeed, most members of the business press believe fervently in “the market” and will defend it against all comers, just as most political reporters believe in the sovereignty of “the people.”) But that’s not usually reflected in what business reporters actually write or say. Business reporters tell us a tidy narrative – every day! – about some fact or fear that changed everything and determined that day’s outcome. If the Federal Reserve cuts interest rates at 2 p.m., then by 2:15, there’s a whole new story – usually focused on heroic or venal *individuals*. Both kinds of reporters boldly make assertions about the future actions of millions of individuals whom they have not even spoken to.

On Jan. 30, I heard a political reporter on NPR “explaining” the McCain victory in Florida by attributing it 100 percent to a late decision by the state’s governor to endorse McCain. Never mind the action by thousands of late-deciding *voters*. They are not seen as agents; they are acted-upon. They are not the subjects of history; they are its objects.

In a sense, a lot of political coverage is not really journalism at all, if you start with the premise that the proper subject matter of journalism is the recent past. (What happened yesterday?) In this, it is different from history (What happened a while ago?) or anthropology or evolutionary biology. It is also different from astrology (What will happen next?). But very often, during campaign season, people called “journalists” break away from discussing the recent past and head off into an entirely different domain – the future.

They are constantly asked, What will happen next? That is a question to which a journalist can, logically, only summon up a single answer: I don’t know. But to say “I don’t know” – especially on television – is professional suicide. So, political journalists boldly go into terra incognita. Like medieval cartographers, they confidently describe places they have never been – complete with boiling vortices, sea monsters, and lands full of gold. It’s very exciting, but not very reliable. (Like the ancient cartographers, they don’t consider being wrong a rebuke – it’s just evidence of the need for a new map!)

Ultimately, there’s not much reason to think this system will change any time soon. It has a lot of momentum

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behind it, and it has a lot of self-perpetuating features. The system rarely looks back, so it's entirely possible to be wrong all the time and yet thrive professionally. In such a culture, it is far more important to be clever and emphatic than to be right.

Besides, as long as nearly all the press corps share that same culture, there's really no penalty for being "wrong." Indeed, there is a sense in which you cannot be wrong provided you have enough company. On those frequent occasions when the entire press corps is wrong, all they have to do is declare the unanticipated outcome a "SURPRISE!" Then, it's off to the races again.

Just today, the *Times* (Feb. 8) has a piece about how those pesky voters keep confounding the experts. The piece cites a couple of spectacular gaffes by prominent members of the commentariat. But those mistakes are not the fault of the experts; they are blamed on the people, for being so fickle. The article is punctuated by this blow-up quote: "The public turns out to have a mind of its own."

Gee, imagine that.

[i] After considerable digging, I found the vote totals on a Time magazine blog, called Swampland. The upshot: in the Super Tuesday states where both parties held primaries on Feb. 5, about 14 million people voted Democratic and about 8 million voted Republican.

[ii] <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t3/tab03.pdf>

[iii] <http://www.mediainfocenter.org/compare/top50/#tv>

[iv] National Public Radio, for example, has its "Voters Project"

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