



Taking the Pulse of America's Voters

Lance Tarrance, '63, Was One of the Biggest Winners on Election Day '84

by Jeffery G. Hanna

When the television networks began proclaiming the big winners on election night last November, the name V. Lance Tarrance was never mentioned.

It should have been. Tarrance was one of the biggest winners of all.

Although he was not a candidate for office, Tarrance won not one, not two, but four statewide races last fall. He also lost two. But, according to a scorecard kept by *The National Journal*, that won/lost ratio of 4-2 represented the best record in the business—the political polling business, that is.

Every night in the months and weeks leading up to November 6, 100 telephone interviewers at the Houston headquarters of Tarrance & Associates were dialing away to test the political waters for such Republican candidates as Senate contenders Mitch McConnell in Kentucky and Phil Gramm in Texas and gubernatorial hopeful James G. Martin in North Carolina.

The data collected in those nightly "tracking" surveys were fed into a computer, which spewed forth print-outs bearing the latest voter trends.

Was Gramm slipping a bit in Texas? Was McConnell gaining in Kentucky? Was Martin's steady pounding away on the education issue hitting home with North Carolina voters? What issues mattered most to the electorate?

The responses changed daily. So did the figures. And so did Tarrance's interpretations and the advice he gave his clients.

Ultimately, those three candidates won (McConnell and Martin in upsets), at least in part, because Lance Tarrance, '63, provided them with an accurate sense of what the electorate was thinking.

And that is no easy accomplishment.

"The most complex psychological decision you can make is how you vote," argues Tarrance (his name rhymes with Lawrence). "Thousands of dynamics go into that decision: family history, religion, region of the country, race, situation. There are many things that go into that matrix.

"After you have studied all this, you come down to one conclusion: voting is an emotional act. Even though we try to quantify it every day in our business, it is still an emotional act."

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Lance Tarrance's fascination with figures and statistics began long before he enrolled at Washington and Lee in the fall of 1959, transferring from Southern Methodist University.

As a junior high school student growing up in the Highland Park section of Dallas, he haunted the press boxes at Southern Methodist University athletic events.

His initial assignment was to serve soft drinks to the sports writers. Eventually he was elevated to the statistics crew for SMU basketball games. At 15 he was given the crucial task of counting field goal attempts for SMU and its opponents.

Tarrance is still fascinated by figures. And he routinely describes his philosophy of politics—including his role in the

process—in athletic terms: the seasons, the players, the scouts, the big plays.

When he came to Washington and Lee, Tarrance had planned to spend one year and then return to Texas to get his degree. He stayed three years and (by attending summer school at SMU) received his bachelor of arts degree in 1962 (although he is technically a member of the Class of '63), majoring in European history.

"I still believe strongly in the value of the small college atmosphere—primarily because of the ability to interact with people from all over the country," says Tarrance, who returned to W&L in early December to present two lectures on current political trends.

"My brother was a finance major in college. He thought I was silly to take philosophy, geology, and other liberal arts courses. But those have helped me immeasurably in my field. I have to understand all the dynamics that go into the political decision-making process."

Tarrance moved steadily up the political ladder on the Republican side after graduating from W&L: from a political researcher for Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign in Texas to director of research for the Texas Republican Party to director of research for the Republican National Committee.

Then he went to the Census Bureau as a special assistant to the director, a position in which he helped direct the 1970 census in the fields of congressional and state government relations. In 1972, Tarrance and University of Michigan political scientist Walter DeVries wrote a book entitled *The Ticket-Splitter: A New Force in American Politics*. ("Considering the trend toward straight tickets in the '84 election, we might have to revise that book," he says.)

After three years in the Census Bureau and a one-year appointment as a Fellow at Harvard University in the John F. Kennedy School of Government and Politics, he joined the California polling firm of Decision/Making/Information, headed by Richard Wirthlin, Ronald Reagan's chief pollster.

He left DMI in 1977 to return to his home state of Texas and establish Tarrance & Associates. A year later Tarrance & Associates had an active role in Bill Clements' campaign for governor of Texas. Many in the Clements' camp credited Tarrance's work as the critical factor in the narrow victory.

Today Tarrance & Associates has branch offices in Austin

and San Francisco. The company has a full-time staff of eight professionals, an interviewing staff of 175 part-time employees, 100 telephones, 3,000 telephone books, a sophisticated telephone switching system, a monthly phone bill of \$50,000, a computer system with direct access to the main-frame computer at Rice University, and an impressive list of clients, ranging from governors, senators, and U.S. representatives to major corporations.

Tarrance's passion is politics. His firm, however, does conduct polls for corporations—public policy research, Tarrance is careful to call it in order to distinguish it from the market research that examines such vital issues as which color toothpaste will sell best.

"If we did only elections, it would be a real peak-and-valley existence," says Tarrance. "Nowadays the peaks aren't as high and the valleys aren't as low because elections are on much longer planning cycles. Not a month after this last election I was asked to work with a congressman from Pennsylvania who had an extremely close election and wants to do a survey to help plan his next election cycle two years from now."

"Ten or 15 years ago the political behavior specialty would have been an adjunct to, say, a marketing research firm that

just gets involved in politics every now and then. Our firm and others like us do election behavior research primarily and diversify our product line with public policy research for corporations, foundations, interest groups, and so forth."

When Tarrance & Associates is not tracking a congressional candidate (in addition to the six statewide races, the firm polled for Republicans in approximately 40 congressional districts last fall), its researchers are surveying the public on everything from parimutuel betting to attitudes toward

emergency health care to how baseball fans feel about their favorite teams.

Still, it is in the political arena that Tarrance is most at home. "I like to get fired up for the elections," he says. "It's a zero-sum game. There is no second-place trophy in our business. You're either a winner or a loser."

Just as he compares an election with an athletic contest, Tarrance goes about his business with a level of competitiveness that has brought both praise and condemnation from his rivals in the business.

In a 1982 feature story on Tarrance in the *Dallas Times-*



"Now, let me see... that's one vote for the Republican, one vote for the Democrat, three for Lassie... and one vote for Kermit the Frog!"

Taking Pulses

Herald, political consultant Ed DeBolt described Tarrance as being "always at war with everybody." Added DeBolt: "Lance is sort of like Maria Callas. She could get away with being a temperamental opera singer, and people would still pay to hear her—because she was so good."

Elections have either winners or losers. Clearly, Tarrance is not in the game to lose.

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Polls (and pollsters) are among the most discussed (and cussed) factors in elections these days. Are we polled to death? Do voters resent being quizzed on their preferences? Are polls occasionally guilty of influencing elections rather than reflecting what is going to happen? Should polls dictate the issues candidates address in a campaign?

Consider this statement from Larry Sabato, a University of Virginia political scientist: "There is something disquieting about a society that needs to have its temperature taken so frequently."

Not surprisingly, Tarrance disagrees with that assessment. He launches a passionate defense of the polls, arguing that they actually *protect* the public. Moreover, he suggests that the public relishes the opportunity to state an opinion.

"People ask why anybody, called randomly by a polling firm, would take an interview," says Tarrance. "First of all, if they're inquisitive, they find out that their phone number was randomly digit-generated and they feel as though they are a premium part of a sample. Secondly, there is enough aura about polls that people recognize that our political leaders listen very carefully to what polls say."

"We watch refusal rates, those who will not participate in a survey, carefully. Those rates have not been growing, despite fears they would. A lot of people thought the public would be saturated by polls and might toy with responses to throw pollsters off. That is not the case."

How do polls protect the public?

Tarrance explains: "Polls are mass public opinion. They are not special interest public opinion. It could be that a congressman is told by persuasive lobbyists that the people want certain thing. Thirty years ago the congressman felt he had to take the best judgment of those lobbyists. Today the same congressman will likely tell those lobbyists, 'I've got a survey going to my constituents, and I'll include a few questions on that subject and see how the public really feels about it.'"

"Secondly, the mass appeal of public opinion polls allows leaders to hear from a greater number of people. Every George Gallup national survey includes one or two people from Wyoming. How many people from Wyoming could get input into issues such as gun control, abortion, defense spending, nuclear treaties, if it were left to the pressure groups?"

Polls promote pluralism, argues Tarrance. "This permits the government to be not just big business-oriented or big labor-oriented, but people-oriented. When that occurs through the vehicle of public opinion polling, then I think we've got a better pluralistic democracy—and a safer one."

Is it possible, as some have suggested, that polls may influence the way votes are cast—even *whether* they are cast. Witness President Reagan's warnings to his supporters to ignore the polls that showed him with an insurmountable lead.

Tarrance insists that polls do not influence the way in which votes are cast but adds: "There is no doubt that some financial resources are given or not given based on who looks like a winner. But it is not enough to turn an election around, in my opinion."

And what of the argument that candidates for political office today are so dependent upon their consultants, the "hired guns" of politics, that candidates no longer say what they believe but what their pollsters tell them to say—i.e., what the public wants to hear?

Tarrance has heard that question before and admits it is a legitimate concern. Yet, he insists that he has not yet seen political candidates "culling through sheaves of computer reports to see how they're going to talk."

Instead, he sees candidates and their consultants using the polls to find the themes that are most important to the voters.

"Suppose a leader has 10 very strongly held opinions about political and economic and social life and of those 10 the public shares six," says Tarrance. "That does not mean he changes his opinion on the other four; he focuses on what the public is most interested in."

A case in point: one of Tarrance's most famous campaigns involved the upset win of Republican Malcolm Wallop over incumbent Sen. Gale McGee in Wyoming. The polls spotted a theme on which McGee seemed vulnerable—his pro-regulation record. The strategy was to hit hard at that issue. The result was a television commercial in which a group of cowboys rode off into the sunset with a portable toilet strapped to a horse, thereby satirizing the federal health and safety regulations.

Tarrance considers himself "the intelligence officer" of a campaign: "I am to monitor changes in the enemy's behavior. I am to raise red flags when I think the campaign is in danger of being off course."

And, he adds, a pollster must be intimately familiar with his candidate's strengths and weaknesses. "You have to know whether your candidate is capable of throwing the long ball. If not, you've got to stay on the ground and use short, safe passes."

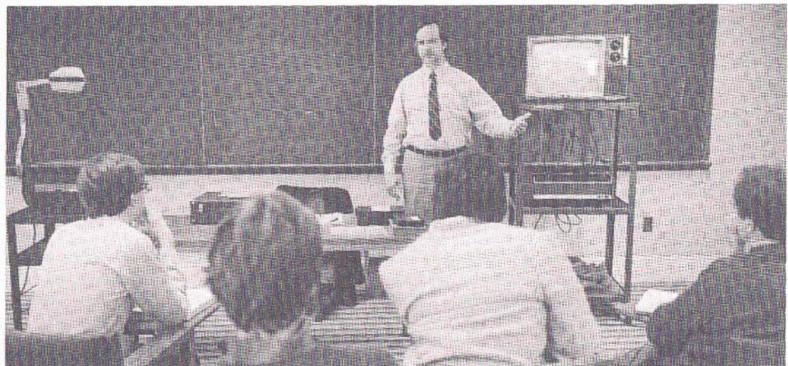
A pollster does more than collect numbers, though that is often the way the job is perceived by the public—a perception based on the pervasiveness of what Tarrance calls "public published polls" such as Gallup and Harris.

"Those polls tend, in my opinion, to be highly superficial. They just tell who's ahead and who's behind and rarely go in to any analytical detail," he says. "They are used by the media because of their entertainment value."

"Our business is private political research. There are probably 500 privately-produced polls for every one that you see in the newspaper or on the networks."

Not that Tarrance polls never make it into the media. His

Tarrance made two presentations to political science classes during a post-election visit to W&L.



polls are often quoted and so is he. Tarrance has been asked to discuss political trends on such network programs as NBC's *Today* show and the *CBS Evening News*. He is careful to see that the numbers are not misconstrued—or misused.

"If a candidate says he is ahead by 20 points in a Tarrance poll, the media will probably call me. I will confirm the numbers. I'll also make certain to cite the full questionnaire text, when the survey was done, the sample size, the confidence interval, all the things that go into the process. If I ever get involved in too partisan an interpretation, I've lost my credibility and our industry's gone."

The critical difference, then, is not the process of collecting data. That part of the industry has advanced steadily from the newspaper straw polls of the 19th century to the return postcard surveys of *Literary Digest* to door-to-door polls to today's highly sophisticated random-digit telephone dialing. Getting the numbers is one thing; making sense of them is another matter.

"I've been in this business 20 years," says Tarrance. "The methods for getting the numbers has become more sophisticated in that time. More importantly, I can interpret the data far more confidently today than I did 20 years ago. That's the art that's added into the process."

Tarrance contends his company's interpretative approach is particularly effective because of attention given to intensity of response.

"It's easy to get the direction of a question," he says. "Understanding how to measure the intensity of that direction is where the game is played. Our firm is measuring how deeply a respondent feels about a particular question every hour. We can't get anyone elected to Congress or the U.S. Senate unless we understand the intensity of the answers we get."

"Every day in a campaign I review the previous night's responses just like medical charts of a patient. I begin to sort out key words that begin to appear in the verbatim responses. I can tell what is beginning to crystallize in terms of imagery.

I can tell if the National Rifle Association has just dropped a mailing and suddenly people are talking about gun control. I pick up what is happening every day in a campaign. It's a very sensitive tool."

Sensitive, but not perfect. Even Tarrance admits that the tracking research, like radar, can occasionally fail to pick up a low-flying aircraft. "That means you've got to have your nose and ears to the organizational side of politics, too."

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Despite his vehement defense of public opinion research in politics, Tarrance does see problems on the horizon. The popularity of polling, especially its entertainment value, has led the major television networks to employ the sophisticated techniques in exit polling in order to score an election night victory over the competition by being the first network to project the election winners.

"Exit polls represent a major threat by keeping a West Coast voter from standing in line for an hour because he already has been told the outcome," says Tarrance. "I expect to see legislation enacted by states to outlaw the exit polls."

There is another criticism of polling that is not so obvious but far more valid, in Tarrance's mind. Polls, he warns, are not crystal balls in the sense of measuring potential opinion.

"The correct criticism of polls is whether the candidates will take a position that is not even salient yet," he explains. "Most polls reflect a bias in that the public has to be aware of the issue, first. And second, that issue has to be meaningful enough for them to want to comment on it. Thirdly, to develop a campaign relevance, you have to see a sharp difference between the parties or the candidates on that issue."

"Polls can only measure the opinion that is out there at the very moment they are taken. They are not measuring what people might think about an issue 10 or 15 years from now or even what those issues might be. That is where your philosophers come in."

For the present, Tarrance will leave the future to others while he keeps his fingers on the pulse of today's voters.