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From voter to micro-target: The ever-evolving science of campaigning in U.S elections

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ABSTRACT

This book review of *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* by Sasha Issenberg describes how this book captures the new trend of merging traditional “gut instinct” politics and scientific research through data. The main strength of the book is the collection of interviews with sources who have been successful at using data in political campaigns. This strength is also the main criticism of this book – its reliance on face-to-face in-depth interview as the main methodology, which may subject the author to spin. The reviewer recommends *The Victory Lab* primarily to practitioners, but indicates that it should be on the reading list of any astute “political junkie.”

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Sasha Issenberg’s *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* describes the evolution of campaigning, as he successfully argues and demonstrates through candid interviews with political strategists that campaigns are now much more efficient, scientific and data-driven than they have ever been. This is because campaigns now exploit the work of social scientists and psychologists by conducting experiments and trials that are meant to better measure the effectiveness of strategies. The book is written in a descriptive style with no obvious subjective argument other than seemingly agreeing with what his interviewees believe: campaigns have evolved in a very scientific way. The information contained in the book certainly shows there has been a change in campaign tactics.

The Victory Lab describes how millions of bits of data have been used by campaigns to analyze details about people such as their habits and their opinions. It further emphasizes this change in strategy by detailing how campaigns

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have adopted micro-targeting strategies akin to those used in marketing to pinpoint every potential voter. To paraphrase one political strategist interviewed in the book: campaigns now treat every individual as a distinct and meaningful unit (p. 246). Those 'units' or potential voters are given 'treatments' (campaign literature, phone calls, or door-to-door canvassing) depending on whether they need to be persuaded or mobilized in the campaign. Those individuals are also given distinct communications depending on their preferences and socio-demographics, which data analysis has indicated would be appropriate or effective. Essentially, 'micro-targeting' has allowed for no potential vote to go unsolicited. Coupled with experiments, campaign strategies in the U.S now appear to be quite scientific, and especially aligned with behavioural science standards.

The author clearly marks this evolution with the convergence of political scientists and political professionals who have not traditionally had a working relationship. In fact, the author claims that the two sides have been so disconnected that political science academics have often been seen by strategists as being detached from the world that they study: quite simply, they do not ask applied questions. Given that the previously divergent interests of academics (to have access to rich data, to be published, and to conduct real-time experiments) and those of campaign professionals (to earn money and try to win) ultimately came together in their campaign efforts, should indeed mark a significant change in the way campaigns are conducted. This book ultimately explains how these two groups have finally managed to come together through a shared appreciation of the merits of experimental research and data analysis. The result has been a new way of campaigning: one that is more personal, more psychological, and eerily much more strategic.

The book clearly provides information about a story that needs to be told concerning how campaigns are changing. A major strength of this book is that the author has interviewed sources who appear to have a good idea about the inner workings of campaigns, and who have played active roles on campaigns. The book chronicles the successes as much as the failures of these individuals in their attempts to make campaigns scientific and efficient. The interviews are rather candid and forthcoming. They detail intra-campaign relations – the egos, the threat of the loss of money to be gained by consultants because academics have found, through experiments, that their tactics are inefficient and at times inutile. This is the kind of 'gossip' no average person or journalist would normally be privy to. So, in fact, the author does political junkies a great service by detailing these private conversations.

The book's key strength, unfortunately, also seems to be its main

weakness. The facts contained in the book – while interesting – appear to be derived from face-to-face interviews with several academics who moonlight as strategists or strategists who moonlight as academics, from both sides of the political arena. The use of these sources only could be cause for concern. The author, being a journalist, could easily be subjected to ‘spin’ from his trusted interviewees. Furthermore, since he does not appear to use additional sources aside from the few academic articles he cites as his interviewees’ work, the book tends to lack depth and critical analysis. This could leave the academic reader’s curious mind desiring more detail, which is why the author’s intended audience appears to be the general public who may be interested in politics or political professionals and other journalists. When this audience is considered, the informative value of the book is high.

Like other books published recently that describe the merger between traditional ‘gut instinct’ politics and scientific research, this book fills the ‘data’ gap. Political messages and emotions are the popular topics of some leading political psychologists and cognitive scientists including Drew Westen and George Lakoff who describe in a very technical and academic manner the way in which political campaigning has become strategically scientific. *The Victory Lab* takes a different approach yet still manages to be informative on the same general subject matter. One important lesson from all these types of books explaining the recent change in campaigning is that scientists have a newly found ‘street credibility’ in the political world. But this thought conjures some tough questions that the author never asks: What about morality in research? Have political professionals and academics abused the intimate experimental findings of psychology for their own gain? Are we OK with that? Is there anything to be said about academics having unbiased aims anymore?

While *The Victory Lab* has the potential to appeal to people of all backgrounds, its utility might be higher for practitioners than for academics. In any case, it should certainly be on the reading list of any astute political junkie. Overall, Sasha Issenberg’s book builds on the gaining consensus that campaigns in the U.S today are more intelligent than ever before. And his book grants us backroom access to the innovative scientific approaches of campaigns that are designed to persuade and mobilize every targeted individual.

References

Issenberg, S. (2012). *The victory lab: The secret science of winning campaigns*. New York, NY: Random House.