

Test-Marketing a President

MODERATOR: "Tell me, when you look at the news and you see George Bush, what kind of descriptions run through your mind? Anybody?"

AMANDA: "Status quo."
CATHERINE: "Ineffective."

CAROLINE: "All I can think of is he's not very impressive, as far as looks go."

DIANE: "He looks more haggard."

MARCIA: "They all seem to do that after they've been in office a while."

DIANE: "I think he seems to be floundering, kind of flip-flopping, trying to find where the public opinion is and go toward it."

MODERATOR: "Does he have

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any strong points? If you were sitting down making a list of pluses and minuses, what would you put on the plus side?"

ELLEN: "His wife has a good sense of humor."

The mood of the encounter falls somewhere between a coffee klatch and a college seminar where no one has done the reading. In a windowless room, a well-paid poll taker is interviewing several housewives, a cashier, a martial-arts instructor and a secretary about their views on the Presidential candidates and on abortion. The discussion — meandering, affable and often ill informed — may seem eminently forgettable, but every word is being taped by hidden microphones and every gesture recorded by a video camera stationed behind a one-way mirror. Over the next few days, the entire two-hour dialogue will be transcribed, pored over by experts and analyzed in a written report.

It has become a commonplace of American political discourse that so-called ordinary people have no say in the process, that the average citizen's opinion counts for less and less in a system dominated by special interests. Yet nearly every day,

somewhere in the country, conversations like this one are being staged among people who have been chosen precisely because of their ordinariness. These people are encouraged to say exactly what is on their minds. They are treated with great solicitude and even paid a fee for the trouble of expressing their opinions, and their thoughts and feelings can end up (sometimes verbatim) in policy speeches and campaign literature. These sessions, called focus groups, are becoming ever more influential, even as the power of the "little guy" allegedly evaporates.

Focus groups are organized by professional poll takers on behalf of senators, congressmen, governors and just about every other politician who can afford them. George Bush and Bill Clinton consult them at almost every turn, and, in theory at least, a casual remark dropped at a focus group could change the course of the Presidential campaign this fall. It has happened before. In the 1984 Democratic primary, when Walter Mondale was laid low by early losses to Gary Hart, a Georgia focus group showed him how to fight back by highlighting Hart's inexperience. And in 1988, when then-Vice President Bush was trailing Michael Dukakis, a New Jersey focus group inspired the unrelent-

ing attack strategy the Bush campaign used to reverse the polls.

Roger Ailes, who directed Bush's media campaign in 1988 and remains leery of focus groups, once offered this testament to their influence: "When I die, I want to come back with real power. I want to come back as a member of a focus group."

GEORGE BUSH'S THIRD STATE of the Union Message marked the official kickoff of the 1992 campaign season, and, to Republicans and Democrats alike, the speech represented a defining moment of his Presidency. Both parties wanted to give this historic event due consideration, so both sides assembled focus groups.

The Republican focus group was made up of roughly 30 voters from the Chicago suburbs who had supported Bush in 1988, but were undecided in 1992. After a round of snacks (free food is a standard feature of focus groups), each of the participants was given a hand-held "Perception Analyzer," which, in spite of its portentous name, is actually just a simple dial wired up to a computer. They were told to move the dial to the right toward 100 when the President said something that struck them favorably

When the history of the hard to find a policy position taken,



shift executed that has not been approved

Focus groups, like the one in Birmingham, Ala., top right, get to the core of what voters truly think. Among focus-group findings were





**1992 campaign is written, it will be
a television ad broadcast or a strategy**

oved by a focus group. By Elizabeth Kolbert



...were that Barbara Bush was a major asset, that Bill Clinton needed a new haircut and that the President had lost touch with ordinary people.

and to the left toward 0 when he said something that made a negative impression.

To the distress of many Bush aides, several of the President's most dramatic lines provoked little or no wrist action from the group. "The cold war didn't end, it was won," produced only a blip on the Perception Analyzer graph. Similarly, "I know we're in hard times, but I know something else — this will not stand!" brought only a modest response. The President's stirring promise to "get more good American jobs within our own hemisphere through the North American Free Trade Agreement" got no reaction at all.

It was not until the President had reached the peroration of his 51-minute address that the Perception Analyzers started to move. "This Government is too big and spends too much," a line that came roughly 40 minutes into the speech, was the high scorer for the evening, receiving an average mark of 94. "Welfare was never meant to be a life style, it

But the military's research division did not trust Capra and his fellow directors to understand how their films could affect a bunch of 18-year-old kids. So it asked some sociologists to investigate.

The research tool these social scientists developed was the "focused interview," an encounter designed to probe the individual's response to a specific stimulus. What the researchers using this technique found was that some scenes from the films provoked a reaction opposite from the one intended; this they labeled the "boomerang effect."

"Even though Frank Capra thought he was reaching hot polloi, these kids didn't know what he was talking about," said one of these researchers, Robert K. Merton. Now a university professor emeritus at Columbia and one of the nation's leading sociologists, Merton recalls that Capra was not always enthusiastic about the researchers' findings: "He didn't accept everything we said."

ion research for the Bush campaign, remembers hooking a focus group up to little dials during the Presidential debates in 1976. When President Gerald Ford made his famous gaffe about Poland — a country that was not under Soviet domination, he said — the focus group didn't even register it. It was not until people had listened to news reports of the debate that the blunder began to take its toll.

In 1984, when Gary Hart won the New Hampshire Democratic primary, the shaken Mondale campaign turned to focus groups for guidance. Mondale's poll taker, Peter D. Hart, went down to Georgia and gathered 15 potential primary voters. They were in love with Gary Hart. An hour and a half into the session, Peter Hart (no relation to Gary) was getting worried. He asked the group to imagine there was a major recession. Who would they want as President? Fifteen hands went up for Gary Hart. Finally, he asked them to imagine a major international crisis. Who

second negative. What did they think of the Governor's opposition to mandatory sentencing for drug offenders? Still no response. Then came a third, the Massachusetts prison furlough program that would eventually star Willie Horton. The group started to get uncomfortable. By the time the session was over, Dukakis would have been lucky to receive a civil greeting.

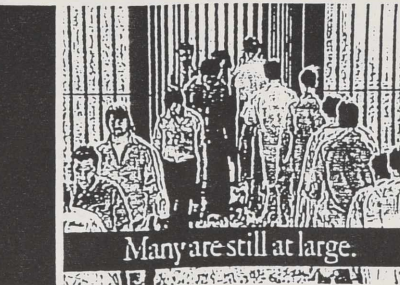
"The finding," Steeper says, "was that more important than any of the negatives was the accumulation of three or four." Each of the negatives, taken individually, was "rationalized away" by the group, according to Steeper. But after a while, the cumulative effect got to be too much. "It took all four or five," Steeper says. "You could literally see the tearing, the ripping going on." Similar results emerged from focus groups at three other locations. Steeper recalls one woman in a Birmingham, Ala., group gasping as if confronted with some awful family secret: "If he believes all that, why, then, he



was never meant to be a habit," a line that came just minutes before the close of the speech, was, at 91, the second highest for the night.

The Bush campaign, engaged at that point in an embarrassing primary battle with Patrick Buchanan, did not wait long to put its focus-group findings to work. The very next day, the campaign shot a new commercial for use in New Hampshire. The commercial showed the President standing in the Oval Office, outlining his economic plan. "My plan will work without big Government spending," he said, looking directly into the camera.

LIKE RADAR AND NUCLEAR power, focus groups are among the many innovations that owe their development to the research effort that accompanied World War II. Early in the war, the Army commissioned training films for its troops from several directors, among them Frank Capra. The films were not just supposed to inform the new trainees about the latest military hardware, they were supposed to boost morale, too.



The idea behind the focused interview, as developed by Merton and his colleagues, is that with proper prodding people can identify the exact reason certain scenes or lines or phrases made them think or act a certain way. The idea is a powerful one, and it did not take long for the focused interview and its offshoot, the focused group interview, to find new applications in the world of marketing.

These days, it is hard to make a move in consumer culture that has not been screened by a focus group. Stroll down the aisle of your local grocery store and the shelves are lined with the results of focus-group research. Turn on your television and see what focus groups have told advertisers and the networks to put on the air. Go to the movies and watch the ending focus groups liked best.

Just when focus groups became a major force in American politics is hard to pinpoint, although there is general agreement that the Republicans became converts before the Democrats. Fred Steeper, a slight, intense man who directs public opin-

ion would they want then?

"All of a sudden, all the hands that shot up for Hart, shot up for Mondale," he recalls. The Mondale campaign swung into action, filming a commercial featuring an ominous-looking red telephone. The campaign continued to air the spot until Mondale had clinched the nomination. "The Hart campaign never could find a counter to that spot," Peter Hart says.

Probably the most notorious of all focus groups was conducted by the Bush campaign four years ago in Paramus, N.J. It was late spring, and polls showed the Vice President trailing Michael Dukakis by 10 points. G.O.P. campaign officials assembled a group of swing voters who had backed Reagan but were leaning toward Dukakis.

The moderator presented the focus group with what the Bush camp considered a Dukakis "negative." What, he asked, did the group think of the Massachusetts Governor's veto of a bill requiring school children to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? Most of the group members were unfazed. Then came a

must be a liberal!"

IN AN ERA WHEN POLLING HAS become so sophisticated it is possible to predict with mathematical certainty who will win an election, focus groups have a curiously low-tech feel. In spite of the dials and the graphs that are often used, focus groups are manifestly unscientific samples, and their results are dependent on the quirky interaction of a dozen or so adults. But these apparent drawbacks have not prevented them from proving a remarkably effective tool for gauging public opinion: skillfully conducted, focus groups allow campaigns to penetrate beyond what voters think they should be thinking to what they actually are thinking.

Much like putting together a dinner party, conducting a successful focus group depends on inviting the right people. Every professional focus group is subject to an elaborate screening process aimed at selecting participants who will feel comfortable enough together to speak candidly. It's considered risky to mix blue- and white-collar workers, even to mix men and women. And



you will almost never find whites and blacks sitting around the same table.

"The key to a focus group is homogeneity," Bill Clinton's poll taker, Stan Greenberg, says. "The more homogeneity, the more revealing."

To illustrate why this is so, Greenberg offers the following story: In 1985, Democratic state legislators in Michigan hired him to find out why, after years of winning, they had suddenly started to lose. Greenberg went to Macomb County, Mich., a region of predominantly white suburbs that has since been enshrined as the birthplace of the Reagan Democrat. There, he held a series of four focus groups. His findings may seem obvious now, but they were not at the time: white, middle-class Democrats were turning away from the party because of race.

These Democratic defectors saw affirmative action as a direct threat to their own livelihoods, and they saw the black-majority city of Detroit as a sinkhole into which their tax dollars

came to your house for dinner, what would you talk about?" They ask participants to write postcards to their candidate, and they ask, "If the candidate were a color, what would he be?" ("Plaid," one wag told the Clinton campaign.)

They also listen carefully. As Steve Lombardo, a moderator of Bush focus groups, notes, "There is a difference between 'I like George Bush' and 'I like George Bush.'"

Like any form of public opinion research, focus groups have their pitfalls: they can be dominated by an opinionated, but unrepresentative, member, for example, and their findings can become so quickly out of date that they end up steering a campaign down the wrong path. But the virtue of focus groups is that they can reveal not just the substance but the texture of public opinion.

To watch focus-group sessions on tape (journalists are rarely allowed to witness the real thing) is to see how much they progress according to their own internal plots. Unlike polls,

Focus-group leaders ask questions like 'If George Bush came to your house for dinner, what would you talk about?'



were disappearing. In each of the focus groups, Greenberg had the participants listen to a quotation from Robert Kennedy exhorting whites to honor their "special obligation" to blacks. Virtually every participant in the four groups — 37 in all — reacted angrily to Kennedy's exhortation.

"I can't go along with that," one participant said.

"No wonder they killed him," another remarked.

The findings were particularly startling to Democrats because public opinion polls were registering something completely different. "If you look at the quantitative surveys on race, you would think that Americans are the most tolerant people on earth," Greenberg says.

To probe beyond the "yes-no-I-don't-know" answers of public opinion surveys, focus-group moderators are practiced in the art of indirection. Their aim is to discover the logic that led the participants to their opinions, however convoluted or inaccurate that might be. To get this logic, it often helps to follow a path of free association. Focus-group leaders frequently ask questions like "If George Bush

were the interaction between the questioner and the respondent is anonymous and essentially static, the mood of focus groups evolves over time, and surprising things often happen. Sometimes participants grow angry and argue with one another; sometimes they grow chummy and exchange glances. In one focus group I watched, a woman confessed to getting pregnant by mistake. A man talked about losing his job.

One professional moderator describes the focus-group dynamic as a reluctant courtship. "They test each other," he says. "You can watch a group develop, like when the first person says 'nigger' and no one gasps."

In this confessional context, halfway to group therapy, feelings ordinarily censored in public comments edge to the surface. These are often the very feelings people take the greatest pains to suppress when talking to poll takers. But they are precisely the feelings that they tend to vote on.

SINCE THE EARLY 1980'S, THE use of focus groups has steadily increased to the (Continued on page 60)

They ask participants to write postcards to their candidate, and they ask, 'If the candidate were a color, what would he be?' ('Plaid,' one wag told the Clinton campaign.)

Out of the mouths of focus groups: From left, Bill Clinton's "smirky" grin. The notorious prison-furlough ad from Bush's 1988 campaign. Al Gore and Bill Clinton on the just-folks road. The First Couple do the White House wave. The politics of chocolate-chip cookies. Chelsea Clinton joined to her mother, Hillary.

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point that they are now a standard feature of all major campaigns, and many minor ones as well. While it is still possible to find political consultants who deride focus groups — a common complaint is that the groups tend to confuse what is interesting with what is important — it is almost impossible to find a strategist who doesn't use them.

This year's Presidential campaign, it is already clear, will be the most aggressively "focus grouped" ever. Voters will not see a single ad that has not been tested before a focus group, nor are they likely to see even a minor shift in strategy that has not been played out before a one-way mirror.

The Clinton campaign began holding its first focus

groups a year ago, even before its candidate had officially announced. In these early groups, which were held in New Hampshire, researchers tested themes like "personal responsibility" and "welfare reform" that Clinton had been refining for years as a member of the determinedly centrist Democratic Leadership Council. These themes were supposed to serve as the backbone of the Arkansas Governor's candidacy.

Yet much to the surprise of Clinton's aides, who assumed that such positions would go over well in conservative New Hampshire, the themes bombed. What the campaign discovered in its focus groups was that after three years of rising unemployment and sinking real-estate values, New Hampshire residents were not much interested in hearing about "personal responsibility." And instead of

dismissing welfare recipients as n'er-do-wells who had lived off the dole for three generations, they now recognized them as people who had lost their jobs to the recession and could no longer make it — people, it turned out, very much like themselves.

In response to this unsettling news, Clinton jettisoned his original message and ordered up a new one tailored for New Hampshire. In the new "Plan for America's Future," welfare reform and personal responsibility were quietly dropped.

This modified American plan went over well until Gennifer Flowers surfaced, triggering a focus-grouping frenzy. Within hours of The Star's release of Flowers's titillating tale, Clinton staffers were ordering up groups to assess the damage. The day the story broke, all the evening newscasts showed Clinton wading into a group

Gennifer Flowers triggered a focus frenzy.

of reporters at a Claremont, N.H., brush factory, hoarsely denying Flowers's story. Clinton's campaign staff feared that the newscasts would be devastating.

"When we did the focus groups, we played the news from that night, all of which we thought was a disaster," Greenberg recalls. "But people were impressed that he went right into the press." As a result of the focus groups, the campaign adopted a "meet the press" strat-

egy. "We always went in the front door," Greenberg says, "not the back."

The same focus groups gave Clinton the strategy he has since faithfully followed whenever discussing the "big A" question: steer clear of all but the vaguest references to marital difficulties. It was O.K. for the Clintons to admit having had "some problems in our marriage." Anything more intimate or detailed made focus groups uncomfortable. "It made them more involved than they wanted to be," explains Greenberg's partner, Celinda Lake.

In the months between New Hampshire and the convention, the Clinton campaign convened focus groups at every major crisis, and at most points in between. Threatened by the early success of Paul Tsongas and his cod-liver-oil message, Clinton aides used focus groups to probe

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for weaknesses in the former Senator, discovering that the best way to slow the "pro-business" Tsongas down was through a populist appeal. In the South and then in the Midwest, the Clinton camp aired commercials contrasting Clinton's "people first" message with Tsongas's more austere economic plan. But on the defensive, Tsongas never regained his bearings after leaving the Northeast, and shortly after the Illinois and Michigan primaries he dropped out of the race.

Similarly, after Jerry California Governor Jerry Brown won the Connecticut primary in late March and suddenly seemed a real contender, the jittery Clinton campaign again called out the focus-group troops. The obvious tactic — to run against "Governor Moonbeam" — was promptly shot down by the groups. "We tested 'flake,'" Greenberg says. "But they didn't think Brown was a flake."

Instead, heading into the crucial New York primary, the Clinton camp was persuaded to challenge Brown directly on the issues. Clinton held a news conference to attack Brown's 13 percent "flat tax" proposal as regressive, while the campaign's commercials in New York warned that the flat tax would wreak havoc on the Social Security system.

Just as Clinton tinkered with his message on the basis of focus-group transcripts, so, too, has he learned from focus groups how to tell and retell his life story. In groups conducted before the Democratic convention, researchers discovered that voters had no idea where Clinton came from. Because of the rich-kid schools he had attended — Georgetown, Oxford and Yale — they assumed he was a Bush-style blue blood. At the convention, the campaign made sure voters found out that Clinton had lost his father before he was born and had worked his way through school.

Special recognition was given to Clinton's late stepfather, an alcoholic. During the primary season, the rap on Clinton was that he was too "slick"; he tried to please all of the people all of the time — a tendency many took to be a sign of his blind

ambition. Focus-group members, however, found the family melodrama of the alcoholic stepfather, who occasionally beat up Clinton's mother, to be an alternative and equally compelling explanation for the candidate's dislike of confrontation. "It gave him a nonpolitical motivation," Lake says.

It was focus groups, too, that tipped off the Clinton campaign to the Chelsea problem. During the primaries, the Clintons had been fiercely protective of their daughter's privacy — so much so, in fact, that many focus-group members voiced surprise to find out that the couple even had a child. At the convention, the 12-year-old Chelsea was positively ubiquitous, often seeming to be joined to her mother and father at the wrist.

Like Nancy Reagan's astrologer, Clinton focus groups have sometimes divined danger in astonishingly everyday things. Clinton's hair, for example. Early groups were disturbed by the Governor's blow-dried coiffure; there was too much of it, and it seemed to stand unnaturally on end. The candidate eventually switched to a new, less stylized-looking cut. Then there was the problem of Clinton's smile. Groups that watched videotapes of the candidate sometimes thought he was "stirking." Clinton has been working on this, too.

IF CLINTON CAMPAIGN aides seem hooked on focus groups this year, Bush staffers are focus-group junkies from way back. The Republican Party has always maintained closer ties to Madison Avenue and has always seemed more eager to adopt the latest marketing technology. It is no accident that this year George Bush chose as his campaign manager Robert M. Teeter, a professional poll taker with decades of experience standing behind a one-way mirror. But these days the Bush campaign is downplaying its focus-group findings, at least in public. Since the State of the Union, Bush aides acknowledge, the results have not been encouraging.

"People haven't heard of anything that he's proposed or done," one Bush aide lamented after a series of focus groups held the week before the Republican convention. "And if you tell them

about something, they don't believe it, because they've never heard of it before."

Already back in February, when the President seemed threatened by a strong challenge from Pat Buchanan, focus groups convinced Bush staffers that their major problem was not Buchanan; it was the President himself. In focus groups held in Georgia and Maryland, Bush campaign researchers found that they had little to fear from Buchanan's increasingly strident attacks; the more Buchanan banged on the President, the more he hurt himself. But focus-group members were not impressed by what they were hearing from the White House.

"We found that we needed to forget about Buchanan and begin worrying about our own message," says the Bush focus-group moderator, Steve Lombardo.

Perhaps the low point for the President's research team came in late April, when the campaign assembled focus groups in Van Nuys, Calif., and Charlotte, N.C. Bush strategists were testing the soft side of the President's support — voters who had sided with the Republicans in '88, but were undecided this time around. As the group sessions progressed, aides stationed behind the one-way mirror found much more unhappiness than bargained for: these one-time Bush voters were convinced that the President did not understand or care about the problems of ordinary Americans. When pressed to decide between Bush and Ross Perot, the group members overwhelmingly chose Perot.

"We had assembled Perot supporters," Sleeper recalls ruefully. "We just didn't know they were Perot supporters."

The Bush campaign is particularly reluctant to talk about how the President himself comes off in focus groups. "People always say, 'he's honest, he's trustworthy'" was all one of Bush's top aides would volunteer. But G.O.P. operatives are considerably more loquacious when it comes to discussing the President's opponents.

"Eewww, he's such a politician," says Mary Matalin, the Bush campaign's deputy director, reporting what she said was a typical focus-group reaction to Bill Clinton. "We're not looking for that stuff," Matalin in-

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sists. "But it has been hard to get past that. It is volunteered in a snickery way."

Throughout most of the spring, the press and Clinton's Democratic opponents were doing such a good job of highlighting his negatives that the Bush campaign did not have to prod its focus groups to dismiss him. Indeed, such is the volatility of focus-group data that just a few weeks before Clinton took a 25-percent lead in the polls, the Arkansas Governor barely even registered in many Bush focus groups. But Bush staffers were already starting to look to the day when Clinton's negatives would start to recede.

"If he starts to make a comeback, we may have to use some things that didn't get much play," Steeper told me in early June, a time when Clinton seemed permanently wedged in third place. "I don't think, for example, that people ever understood his real estate dealings."

Early signs of how the Bush campaign will apply its focus-group findings are already evident in the rhetoric of the campaign's "pit bull," Vice President Dan Quayle. In recent weeks, Quayle has insistently chomped away at the "Eewww, he's such a politician" theme, dismissing Clinton's personality, his campaign and even his bus tours as "slick." "The 'slick' thing will stick," one Bush researcher predicts. "It just has to be brought back."

Hillary Clinton, too, seems destined to be the subject of continuing unflattering attentions from the Bush campaign. Republican focus groups invariably cite Barba-

ra Bush as one of the President's major strengths, while labeling Clinton's wife a liability. Even Democratic focus groups have tended to perceive Hillary Clinton as a conniving, manipulative spouse — Lady Macbeth in a husband — although Clinton staffers insist her image is mellowing.

Focus groups this year, according to Matalin, "have a sharper and more clear reaction to the spouses. Barbara is cookies and grandchildren. Hillary is too brassy and coldly ambitious. This leads to too much influence." In an obvious effort to capitalize on the First Lady's high focus-group standing, the Bush campaign orchestrated the unusual spousal testimonial — complete with grandchildren — that aired in prime time on the third night of the Republican convention.

Although the Bush campaign has plenty of information on the Clintons, most of its spring and early summer focus groups were devoted to Perot, who, at the time, seemed to the President's staff the tougher challenger in the fall. The Texan's fiscal conservatism and Norman Rockwell values were doing voters directly from the President's base, as the California and North Carolina groups demonstrated. Something, the Bush campaign was convinced, had to be done. But what?

The answer began to emerge from focus groups conducted in May. These groups showed that the lurking authoritarianism of Perot's "Just do it" philosophy was making voters uneasy. One focus-group member went so far as to liken Perot to Hitler.

The Bush campaign moved quickly to exploit this vulnerability. Aides to the President directed reporters to stories about the Texas billionaire's penchant for private investigators. Vice President Dan Quayle denounced the diminutive Perot as a "temperamental tycoon" and asked voters to "imagine having the I.R.S., the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. under his control."

While the President's proxies were busy trying to puncture Perot, the Perot forces were doing some research of their own. In June, the campaign's poll taker, Paul Maslin, traveled the country, talking to undecided and Perot-leaning voters, a dozen at a time. Not surprisingly, the

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cus groups were beginning to voice impatience with Perot's vagueness. The unannounced candidate was asking voters to abandon the security of the two-party system, but was offering them an alarmingly flimsy vessel with which to make this journey. "The problem is, Why won't he tell me what he stands for?" one high-ranking Perot staff member told me in mid-July. "We're in a very dicey situation." A few days later, Perot resolved the situation by dropping out of the race.

AT THE START OF A RECENT focus group on a state abortion referendum, a

gray-haired insurance salesman asked with curiosity and a touch of wariness why anyone would be willing to pay him for his opinion. The moderator put off the question to allow the rest of the group to introduce themselves. Then he circled back: "It's the price," he explained, "of democracy."

Wariness is not unusual at the start of a focus group, nor is it particularly surprising. It does seem odd for average citizens to be paid up to \$50 to express opinions that are being given away free at bars, malls and playgrounds across America. But if focus-group participants are often suspicious at first, few remain so for long. Almost inevitably, they warm to the notion that someone — anyone

— is interested in what they have to say. Focus-group moderators report that one of the hardest parts of their job is getting the group to shut up at the end and go home.

Watching focus groups in action, one can easily sympathize with their enthusiasm. Participants feel themselves empowered by the experience, as if they were finally being asked to take a hand in shaping America's future. As the session wears on, they seem to forget what they suspected at the start: If they are being paid to give their opinion, this cannot be an altogether disinterested exercise in democracy.

And indeed it is not. Focus groups have very little to do with democracy — or at least with the version of democra-

cy taught in civics classes. They grow out of the assumption that Americans are fickle in their loyalties, that they don't completely understand their own political interests and that their opinions are easier to manipulate than to enlighten. The focus group is the product not of a Lockean but of a Hobbesian world.

In this world, politicians and their handlers care enormously about voters' opinions and values, and want to hear exactly how average citizens express themselves because, in this case at least, knowledge really is power. As one Bush researcher explains: "It's not just what they say, it's how they say it. When people talk about 'change,' what words do they use? If we know how average Ameri-

cans describe their feelings, we can reach them that much more easily."

The process of soliciting voters' opinions only in order to produce more potent propaganda causes even those who lead focus groups to have qualms. Some of these researchers maintain that they select their causes carefully, that the meritorious ends justify the questionable means. Others never manage completely to overcome their ambivalence. When a successful focus group is over, Paul Maslin, Perot's former poll taker, says: "You have that sense of innocence lost. You have that twinge of knowledge that they're the guinea pigs allowing us to exploit the electorate." ■