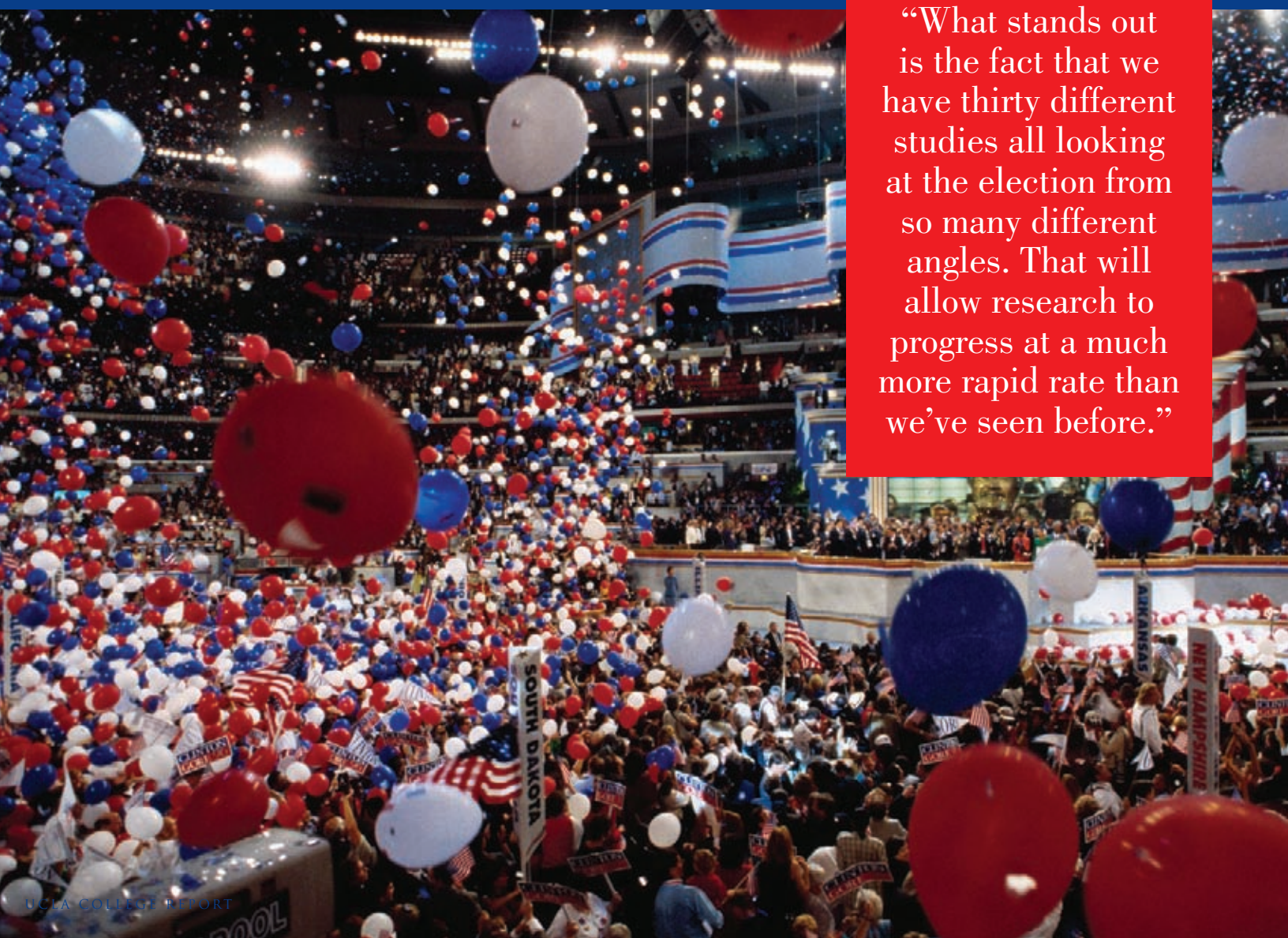


Exploring the American Political Mind

UCLA political scientist Lynn Vavreck is one of the founders of the only nationwide presidential poll conducted exclusively on the Internet—a project that reaches one of the largest groups of U.S. voters ever fielded in a study of a U.S. presidential race.

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By Meg Sullivan

The meteoric rise of presidential hopeful Barack Obama that began with Super Tuesday may have surprised many voters, but not UCLA political scientist Lynn Vavreck.

From the helm of the only nationwide presidential study being conducted this election entirely over the Internet, Vavreck had observed two telling details:

In December, voters indicated that they considered presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to be a strong leader, but they didn't trust her. Then in January, more than half of the supporters of presidential hopeful John Edwards said they would throw their support behind Obama if Edwards were to bow out of the campaign, which he did six days before Super Tuesday.

"From our data we could tell that when Edwards quit, his supporters would largely migrate to Obama, dramatically increasing Obama's base of support," said Vavreck, an assistant professor of political science. "Sure enough, Obama went on to win 11 straight Democratic contests."

Vavreck's findings illustrate the power of the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, which she co-founded two years ago with the help of Doug Rivers, a Stanford political scientist and the founder of the polling research firm You Gov/Polimetrix.

Through the end of the 2008 presidential election, Vavreck and Simon Jackman, the project's co-director from Stanford, will lead 28 research teams at universities worldwide as they probe the minds of voters.

The Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project explores a broad range of questions about voters, issues, and political scenarios, including such issues as: How do neighborhoods affect the voting of residents? How do peers, friends, and co-workers influence voting behavior compared to other less-personal sources such as the media? And what role do campaign advertising, direct mail, and canvassing have on voters who live in competitive states compared to non-competitive states?

In addition to being among the first nationwide presidential polls to employ the Internet—and so far the only nationwide presidential poll conducted exclusively on the Web—the project reaches one of the largest groups of U.S. voters ever fielded in a study of a U.S. presidential race. Because of its size, the poll promises to capture subtle shifts in the electorate as the election proceeds.

"It's like taking the temperatures of supporters of different candidates, and seeing how rankings and ratings change as candidates drop out and new information is revealed," Vavreck said.

The work is a worthy objective for research that started as a stop-gap measure after the cancellation in 2000 of a project that gauged voter attitudes in Congressional elections dating back to 1954.

The study represented the only uninterrupted record of voter attitudes in mid-term races since scientific polling began. But in the demise of the study, Vavreck spied an opportunity.

"A small group of us starting talking about how to raise the money to continue the data collection, and the Internet seemed like an obvious way to cut costs," Vavreck recalled.

Instead of looking for one major funder to support the



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entire project, Vavreck and Rivers believed that many participating researchers could afford to pay a small sum in exchange for a small amount of unique survey content.

More than 100 political scientists from 38 universities across the country paid for the study of the 2006 election cycle that polled 39,000 American citizens over the Internet, making the project not just the first nationwide election poll to be conducted online, but also the first cooperative study of its kind and the largest Congressional election study ever mounted.

"Lynn's research is not only creating significant new insight into U.S. elections," said social sciences acting dean Reynaldo Macías, "but her project is also becoming a model for collaborative research, the use of innovative methods and technologies, and how to create new resources that can benefit scholars everywhere."

Thanks to Vavreck and her colleagues, the survey survived and also opened new opportunities for inquiry to a broad range of researchers. The project also uncovered an historic finding: despite the fact that Congressional elections typically revolve around local issues, voter identification with their political party during the 2006 race played the largest role ever quantified in a mid-term election.

"This finding might have totally slipped through the cracks," Vavreck said.

While other comprehensive studies of presidential elections exist, Vavreck's cooperative project remains the only national election research funded by participants, who also design and field their own content.

On six occasions during this election season, the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project will query a total of nearly 50,000 U.S. voters, using questions from all 28 participating scholars.

"What stands out is the fact that we have thirty different studies all looking at the election from so many different angles," Vavreck said. "That will allow research in this field to progress at a much more rapid rate than we've seen before." 