

DICK'S DANCE WITH DEMOCRACY

United Media Syndicated Column

May 3, 2001

Richard Scammon died last week at age 86, after a long illness.

As a young boy in Minneapolis, he began clipping election stories and collecting voting statistics in carefully penned notebooks. In early November of 1948, when 50 out of 50 journalists covering the presidential campaign said Tom Dewey would be elected, Dick Scammon demurred and said, no, actually Harry Truman would win. Scammon was once called a "one-man think tank," and a *New Yorker* profile reported that, unbeknownst to all, Scammon's very large body housed a Univac computer.

Back in the mother country, the word "psephology" is in somewhat common usage. It means "the study of elections." For about four decades, Dick Scammon was the leading psephologist in America.

Dick had a cause, with several facets. It is gratifying to report that he was successful.

He played a central role in the way Americans came to understand elections. He believed elections were being covered mostly as narration and anecdote. He understood that such coverage was important and interesting. (He was a great fan and friend of Teddy White's.) But Scammon also believed there was another, more important dimension to voting that was being short-shrifted. There was data: voting results, public opinion polling and demographics.

In 1955, he founded the Elections Research Center, which published compendia of voting statistics. In the early 1960s, he was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to

be director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census. I met him there while we collaborated on a book titled "This U.S.A.," which tried to present census data in a readable way.

In late 1968, he suggested that we work on another book about data -- election data. "The Real Majority" was published in 1970. It was applauded and denounced, everyday, everywhere. It became an influential bestseller, beyond the dreams of either author.

When I started on that project with Dick, I actually thought I knew something about elections and politics. I was a young fellow, but I had run twice for office in Stamford, Conn. -- and lost twice. I had been a speechwriter for President Lyndon Johnson. (One of my chores was to write memos to Johnson about Scammon's views.)

As we talked about the book, I came to realize that I didn't know beans about elections. Scammon kept telling me to "marinate yourself in the data."

He was a gifted phrase-maker. In that heady and fiery moment of the 1960s, analysts of the liberal left announced that American elections were going through a sea change. Henceforward they would be swung by the votes of "the young, the black and the poor." Asked about it, Scammon noted calmly the American electorate was "unyoung, unpoor and unblack," a phrase that came to be cited more than the original coinage.

In "The Real Majority," we tried to set out a "general theory of American elections." General theories are lucky if they last until their publication date. But in 1992, we wrote a new introduction to the book. We stared that General Theory in the eye and declared it as valid as when written --

perhaps more so.

At its root was what we called "The Social Issue." We said that an era had passed: Democrats could no longer win elections by merely claiming that Republicans were mean fat cats and Democrats represented "the little guy."

There was another force rising among the voters and slaughtering Democrats. Voters were fed up with crime, racial antagonism, eroding values, busing, drugs, disruption, quotas, welfare, pornography, Vietnam draft-dodging, dependency, permissiveness and, as much as anything, the disparagement of America. Many Democrats were honorably trying to find their way in this new era, but it was tough sledding.

In short, we believed then that there was more to American elections than "the economy, stupid." Much more. (For the record: In the grand economic year of 2000, more American voters said "moral issues" were of greater importance than "economic issues." In the gloomy economic year of 1992, most of the polling showed similar results.)

Politicians of both parties came up to us and told us how they were influenced by the book. Some were office-holders when they first read it. Later, some members of Congress said they had studied it as assigned reading in college. A third generation is coming along.

Dick Scammon's cause had a deep rationale. He cared so much about elections because he was a passionate democrat and a patriot. He told me many times of watching Israeli kibbutzniks going to vote, and the Israeli political scientist who described the view as "the dance of democracy."

He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1941,

before Pearl Harbor, attaining the rank of captain. After World War II, he served in occupied Germany under Gen. Lucius Clay, Gen. Eisenhower's man in charge of re-democratizing Germany. Serving in Stuttgart, Scammon's title was Chief, Elections and Political Parties Office, of the U.S. Army Office of Military Government.

Dick was a gentle man, but he hated Nazis and Soviets. They were thugs who were out to destroy what he loved, democracy.

The bad guys lost. The good guys won. Dick Scammon reveled in the outcome.

BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."

©2000, *NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.*