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## The Man Who Invented the Educated Political Operative? Vincent Harris and the importance of higher education

If you pay serious attention to American party politics, it is hard to imagine you have not yet heard of Vincent Harris. As featured in a recent BloombergPolitics piece, Harris is [“The Man Who Invented the Republican Internet.”](#) To summarize and oversimplify, Harris has taken the stereotypical stodgy Republican candidate, mixed with Twitter, and won. Harris ran their digital campaigns, and in news that broke recently, Rand Paul has signed Harris as chief digital strategist.



But Vincent Harris is also a graduate student in the Department of Government, and wearing his academic hat, he believes political practitioners have ignored academic research for too long. He thinks there is a big gap between the two worlds, and he is doing his part to bridge that gap. For example, he says, “if you are going to hire a pollster, wouldn’t you like that pollster to have a Ph.D. in statistics? Or, don’t you, personally, want to be able to look at a poll and have a deeper understanding of what that poll is saying?”

Harris’ broader argument is that too much of the campaign industry operates on Beltway conventional wisdom, and to him that just makes no sense. Why spend millions of dollars and risk your political future based on gut feelings, when there is an academic universe churning out research with real data to deploy in campaigns? Harris says that many people in politics do not trust math, but, for him, data do not lie. And on the Republican side he says many have a misconceived notion that academics are out to get Republicans. Harris sees no partisan agendas at the university, just research agendas.



Numbers do not lie – that is one side of Harris’ argument in support of the academic enterprise. The other is much deeper, much more intellectual, and arguably much more powerful. It is one of gaining perspective, asking different questions, and finding different paths to the answers. “Being a graduate student has helped and forced me to read things, to discover research, and to sit down and think about questions that I never would have thought about.”

Are we spending money in the right ways? How are voters perceiving information we are sharing with them? These are some of the questions Harris has pursued and continues pursuing, and he transfers his studies to his real work.

That these intellectual exercises have had direct payoff in the business world is evidenced, in abundance, by the success of [Harris Media](#). “My classes here have been so helpful in giving me different perspectives than the norm, and it is so valuable ... more people in the industry should pursue graduate degrees and force themselves to keep learning, otherwise the execution of practical politics stagnates.”

Harris offers the same advice to undergraduates thinking of pursuing a career in practical politics: “Undergraduate is just the surface, you have to dig deeper.” Harris says there is a huge creative aspect to it, spurred in part by curiosity: “I have gone down so many rabbit holes, I have been opened to so much rich literature and research, not just in American politics, but in other fields too, and it all has a practical application.”

Part of the utility of his studies has come in forcing him to take the time to step back from his work and look at it in a setting he never would have otherwise. Harris has worked on campaigns, collected data, and then investigated the data in term papers he wrote for courses. “I have looked at and analyzed my own datasets and built stuff out of them. Taking a step back in this way, this is something that there is not time for in the real world. Being in graduate school has forced me into an environment where I have had to look at these data in different ways than I would have, and it has been huge.”

And what about Harris’ studies? What exactly is he working on, and are the strategies he devises for clients rooted in the research he is so firm in advocating for? The answers to both are related.



Harris believes that to reach voters, campaigns have to break through the clutter, particularly the entertainment clutter in a media world dominated by the likes of Kim Kardashian and Jon Stewart. In short, he believes effective campaigns are entertaining campaigns. As for data, he knows that entertaining campaigns reach more people – the number of people seeing the information campaigns put out increases when the content is entertaining and funny. But, reach is only half the game.

What is happening at the level of the individual voter? Does more entertaining content affect the speed and extent of voters changing their preferences, or whether they are more likely to recall information? Harris now has a wealth of campaign data to answer such questions, and he plans to do just that.



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