



# The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns

*Sasha Issenberg*

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**The book *Politico* calls “*Moneyball for politics*” shows how cutting-edge social science and analytics are reshaping the modern political campaign.**

Renegade thinkers are crashing the gates of a venerable American institution, shoving aside its so-called wise men and replacing them with a radical new data-driven order. We’ve seen it in sports, and now in *The Victory Lab*, journalist Sasha Issenberg tells the hidden story of the analytical revolution upending the way political campaigns are run in the 21st century.

*The Victory Lab* follows the academics and maverick operatives rocking the war room and re-engineering a high-stakes industry previously run on little more than gut instinct and outdated assumptions. Armed with research from behavioural psychology and randomized experiments that treat voters as unwitting guinea pigs, the smartest campaigns now believe they know who you will vote for even before you do. Issenberg tracks these fascinating techniques—which include cutting edge persuasion experiments, innovative ways to mobilize voters, heavily researched electioneering methods—and shows how our most important figures, such as Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, are putting them to use with surprising skill and alacrity.

Provocative, clear-eyed and energetically reported, *The Victory Lab* offers iconoclastic insights into political marketing, human decision-making, and the increasing power of analytics.

## The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns Details

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### Mary says

While volunteering for the Obama campaign in 2008, I wondered where that seemingly endless stream of names and phone numbers of potential supporters was coming from. Issenberg's book partially answers my question, although the data-driven Obama campaign--quite obviously the culmination of the story--doesn't come up until nearly 250 pages into the work. My biggest complaint about the book is that its main characters--all of the behind-the-scenes political scientists and data people who have developed ways to microtarget voters--remain fairly faceless; there are lots of them, from both ends of the political spectrum, and it's very difficult to keep them straight, at least outside of the chapters where they are primarily discussed. There's also a bit of a chronology problem, as many of the developments seem to cluster around the 2000 and 2004 election seasons, but the author moves backward and forward in time while focusing on the stories of specific characters. If you can look past these narrative challenges, however, it's interesting to learn how little political campaigns knew about the effectiveness of specific outreach techniques until fairly recently. And it's fascinating to watch in the midst of another election cycle how the campaigns seem to be responding to what has been learned.

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### Rob Kitchin says

In *The Victory Lab*, Issenberg charts the use of scientific methods in the practice of electioneering in US politics. What's fascinating about his account is that up until very recently there was very little science behind how elections were conducted, and there's been a noticeable disconnect between political science and the electioneers. The strategy was simply one of blanket advertising across different media, mail shots, debates, mudslinging and rallies. There was little attempt to scientifically measure and evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches, or to segment and target populations. Drawing on his own experience of a journalist covering elections and interviews with a number of key players, Issenberg provides an account of the rise of data and statistically-driven campaigning in the US, culminating in Obama's election in 2008. Because the chapters are arranged by chronology and by particular groups/campaigns, the structure tends to move to-and-fro a little. That said, the narrative is easy enough to follow, and the text is lively, engaging and informative. Somewhat oddly, there seems to have been no attempt to learn anything from elections outside of the US, and Issenberg's narrative barely strays beyond US shores. Overall, what the book demonstrates is the US elections are now being run like lab-experiments, underpinned by big data and statistical algorithms, and they're set to follow this approach for the foreseeable future.

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### Ben says

Once it gets past some overly long history of the political science in the field dating back to the early parts of the last century, it gets pretty interesting. The discussion of the randomized experiments does a nice job conveying goals and ideas in layman's terms. What's interesting though is so much of the book focuses on tricks used to get people to vote, almost none of which involve a specific candidate. That raises the question of how much does the candidate even matter? Or put another way, how much of a worse candidate does one need to be compared to another to have the turnout things not make a difference in making them competitive? Or is it just that those tricks help bolster already well regarded candidates?

## **Mickey Hoffman says**

This book turned out to be as much a collection of biographies as an explanation of research and practices that lead to winning campaigns. And I'm not that interested in the lives of the various political scientists and politicians.

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## **Kate McCarthy says**

Better than a campaign handbook that tells you the best practices for campaigning, the Victory Lab takes you on a narrative journey of market testing and behavioral studies to inform campaign strategy, ultimately multi-channel micro-targeting.

I love learning the narrative of how and why different campaign strategies emerged, and the stories of the wins and losses. While the level of detail is rich and interesting, I was still taken aback in Chapter 3 when we started our third new course of history being told--this time on the scientific method-- in as many chapters.

And there are great morsels for the campaign/nonprofit marketer to grab immediately for their personal toolkit, from efficacy of various marketing channels to using data to inspire volunteers.

It was inspiring, too--about data, the value of micro-targeting our marketing messages, how what we know about human behavior can incite action, and that the good old grassroots strategies of yesteryear still matter.

I highly recommend The Victory Lab to those working in political science and nonprofit marketing.

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## **Julian Haigh says**

This book was very personal for me. I created a business focused on volunteer mobilization after reading Green and Gerber's "Get out the Vote!" (an absolute must if you're a campaigner) and have briefly connected with Hal Malchow. It's a frustrating industry, and to hear these brave souls fighting the good fight for more effective campaigns that reach out and connect with people... argghhh... why is it such a difficult message to get across?

Written by a journalist, it's a nice narrative account and introduction to the industry and trends but doesn't get into details for the more academic.

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## **Cheryl says**

I have to admit that I do not follow the elections that closely. However, I do try to educate myself on the primary candidates and what they stand for, so that I can make my vote really count. This is what intrigued me about this book. I know that all of the candidates use some sort of tactic to win over the voters but I don't

really pay attention to what type.

Mr. Issenberg really takes the time to break down all the different ways that the candidates and not just the current ones but all the past ones as well have used different tactics to win over the voters. Either by social media or by phone calls, door to door soliciting or television. In this book, Mr. Issenberg dissects politics through out the course of history. You will learn way more then you ever wanted to from this book. I admit that this book was so detailed that after a while, I found myself kind of skimming over the last half of the book. After reading this book, I will take away a better understanding of the game of politics. As you are pondering over with candidate to cast your vote for this election, there is one choice you don't have to think too hard about and that is picking up a copy of The Victory Lab to read.

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### **Melissa says**

Didn't care for this book at all. Was frequently impatient with the writing style. Felt his propensity for describing his character's hair style in the first 2/3s of the book to be a little off-putting; after he got past the two women operatives he talked about (one Dem, one Rep) he stopped the practice. Uh-Huh. Also some detailed descriptions of campuses I could have lived without. And a random description of a bus route in Akron Ohio that was meant to be emblematic but was ... dull. Perhaps because I take city buses occasionally myself and don't need the full description of what it's like to sit on a bus ...

Very general history of early political science, and some discussion of modern large-scale political campaigns ... with some heavy questions on the reliability of the sources. I felt like the Dem campaigns/campaign operatives were much more transparent, whereas the Rep campaigns were much more opaque in their results. Did the techniques described in the book really work? well, no idea: on the Rep side, he mostly talked about the experiments and not the results -- so who knows? And who knows if what worked for the Reps was really the methods described in the book, or if it was some combination of those turn-out methods AND voter suppression/chaos generation ... which seem to be their main tactics these days.

So, a somewhat interesting read, if read with a touch of skepticism, and a dollop of patience. Could have used a more critical editor to cut it down a bit, as it felt long and a bit jumpy. He'd talk about someone he was clearly intending to focus on, and suddenly the next chapter would be somewhere/someone else ... and it would ended up tying back, but in fairly convoluted ways.

As for reading it to gain useful knowledge: well, not so much. Did reinforce my belief that the Obama campaigns were pretty amazing and well-managed: but for campaigns not quite on that scale, the useful information was pretty sparse.

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### **Sheris225 says**

This is a great book. It is filled with amazing insider details about every big campaign in the last forty years. It will have you grinning and shaking your head at some of the strategy that various campaign analysts came up with. The author has obtained amazing access. This history familiarizes the reader with the thought process behind the decisions that campaigns make to identify & motivate likely voters.

The second half of the book lays out in detail the sophisticated data analysis employed to great success in 2008 & 2012. It is not just a book about numbers. It is a book about social history, changing demographics and the choices made by human beings hoping to influence other human beings. I am a campaign veteran and

learned much. Fun absorbing read.

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## Carl says

I read this book as part of a book discussion group with political activists and the book was unpopular for a number of reasons.

1. It doesn't have much of anything that's useful if you're in politics at the local level.
2. There are way too many "characters". People are introduced in every chapter and it's just too many to keep track of.
3. The author has an annoying way of describing people and places when there's no need to describe them. It's a stylistic thing that draws attention to itself.
4. There's an asymmetry in the information. Democrats provide information that is often objectively verifiable. Republican sources are taken at their word, even though Issenberg quotes one of his GOP sources as admitting he lied to media outlets about what the Republicans were really doing.
5. Issenberg slips into repeating conventional wisdom, like the sneering attitude he has toward Howard Dean, and doesn't seem all that interested in the nuts and bolts details as he is in telling a story.

The book reads like Issenberg is trying to position himself as a guest on media outlets when they do stories on the mechanics of campaigning. He's doing more to show he's friends with the right people than he's explaining what's really going on.

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## Brigitta Johnson says

Probably only going to be interesting to people in politics - and I truly mean politics not policy. Messaging, strategy, emerging micro trends and he means we use to convey those messages etc. that being said I really appreciated their explanation of the scholarly works behind the decisions (or lack thereof). Really outlines how were still going on our gut because it's virtually impossible to do in theater experiments.

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## Sébastien Belliveau says

A very interesting read. Even more so for people who have worked or are involved in politics, as it will certainly have them look back on their past work with a completely different point of view.

The basic premise of The Victory Lab rests on the calculation made to differentiate successful election practices from unsuccessful ones. Basically, the way many people currently make their evaluations is as such: did your candidate win? If so, whatever you did worked and should be repeated. Did your candidate lose? If so, whatever you did failed and should not be repeated.

Obviously, there is a severe flaw in this calculation. So if we can't judge how successful a method ends up being by the overall success of a campaign, how can we?

Working in Canadian politics myself, this book has made me realize a few things which I want to apply in my own work and that I found extremely interesting:

1. Promoting the use of personalized data. I was already a proponent of collecting and using data to help identify voters and link them with the issues which interest them. The use of data Issenberg describes, however, makes an even bigger leap. Political Parties and groups in the USA make use of the data, combined with algorithms, to help predict not only how or if an individual is likely to vote, but how or if a person will be impacted by a certain type of messaging, policy decisions, etc. I know there are more books on this type of subject and I will undoubtedly look for them.
2. Empirical analysis and using these to have the best "bang for your buck" effect. Often, you hear political advisors state that a certain thing must be done, or that a certain event needs to be held, with anecdotal reasons as to why they work. However, we operate in a world of exhaustible resources, both in money and manpower. This is even more of a reality in Canada than in the United States. Every action needs to have a goal and you need to be able to evaluate if that goal has been accomplished or not. However, this opens up a Pandora's box in terms of having to tell people who have taken decisions for years that their "methods" don't actually work or that we need to find a more efficient way to achieve similar goals.
3. Experiencing with different material. Sending different formats of mailouts and comparing which has a better effect. Sending different wording on an identical subject and determining which had a better success rate. We are all filled with our biases and pre-determined opinions, which are often based on faulty assumptions. This book has definitely shown me a few things which work, but which also seemed to me to be completely counter-intuitive.
4. How to encourage people to go out to vote. If there is one thing this book has taught me, is that most people know they should go vote during elections, even if they don't necessarily do so. So how do we get the people to make that extra leap? There is one method explained early in the book which talks of using public voting records to encourage (or shame) people into voting which increases the turnout by as much as 20%! How can political parties harness this potential? How can society itself better encourage voter turnout with this information? Consider my interest extremely piqued.

Many people call this book a "must read" for politicians. I don't know if I would go that far. However, there are many people operating in politics who I know need to read something like this, if only to come to the realization that their opinions are extremely flawed and cannot be backed up by any kind of empirical data. We need to exit this logic that unsuccessful election bids mean unsuccessful methods were used and vice-versa.

To everyone interested in "renewal" and a "new approach" in politics and all that jazz, this book is for you.

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## **Ralphie Nader says**

I thought this was a great and important subject to cover, but I left the book confused about how "the science" of winning of campaigns works today. Maybe this is just the reality of the subject, but I felt that while the author did a good job at covering individuals and their individual studies/tests, he didn't provide the reader with the broader trends and current best practices of today's cutting edge campaigns.

I would have liked to see a more general look on how science and data are used by the major parties, the future of this type of study, and what practices would smart candidates be sure to use. I felt like the reader was thrown a lot of numbers from anecdotes and narrow studies, and left to sort out their own conclusions.

## **Dan says**

This blows my mind.

When an election is close, the race has very little to do with issues. You win with two strategies: convert swing voters to your side, and get your likely voters to the polls. But those two simple strategies lead to some fascinating conclusions.

One, is that there is no such thing as privacy, and the campaigns know everything about you already. They probably can tell who you're going to vote for before you've even decided. Scared yet?

I live in the reddest of red states, so the campaigns don't pay attention to me. But if Texas ever turns purple, then I've got facebook, google pages, and book reviews that the campaigns will use to determine if I should receive negative ad campaigns or Get Out The Vote literature. And that's unsettling.

Essentially, this is the story of how campaigns figured out how to target each individual voter, instead of relying solely on mass market advertising. If you have paid attention to elections in the past, get ready to unlearn everything you thought you knew. Was George W. Bush's reelection successful only because he mobilized his base? That's what the pundits said. Turns out, that's just not true.

This is not a partisan book at all. It doesn't talk about which side is better than the other. It simply documents the battles in the war. There were two sides, each learning how to use new technology. The two sides were not equal in their knowledge, but developed their tactics differently based on their own unique strengths and needs. The book gives the inside story of both sides.

This was a very thought-provoking read.

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## **Josh Lindner says**

Required reading for anyone who works in politics.

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