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Canned Speech: Selling Democracy in the Phonographic Age

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The phonograph presented American presidential aspirants with an opportunity to surmount eighteenth-century campaigning standards and meet the challenges of an expanding democracy and electorate. Thomas Edison’s invention—with its corresponding records—arguably was the first mechanical media technology to find its way into political campaigning on a mass scale. By 1908, canned, recorded speeches were poised to become a marketable alternative to soliciting ballots in person while also facilitating a candidate’s direct engagement with voters, thus enabling contenders and media firms like Edison’s National Phonograph Company to curate personas that were sold both commercially and at the polls. As a result, the phonograph’s practical role allowed the public to hear candidates directly and in their own words, marking an important but underrecognized step forward in the democratization of access to information (and the concomitant risk of manipulation and distortion that came along with it) that one finds in today’s social media.

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When National Phonograph Company recording specialist Harold Voorhis left his New Jersey home in May 1908, bound for Lincoln, Nebraska, he carried with him a phonograph, a “plentiful supply of wax masters,” and more than a few nervous butterflies. Tasked by company superiors with “canning” several short speeches by Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, Voorhis admitted later that he “felt a little ‘shaky’” given the magnitude of the occasion. “I knew the Records were to be important ones, especially with Mr. Bryan [being] so prominent in the Presidential campaign,” Voorhis later recalled, “and I was more than anxious to secure good results.” Arriving focused on the work at hand, Voorhis spent the next two days in Bryan’s home library, as the Great Commoner delivered several carefully crafted speeches to an audience consisting only of himself, his wife—the acclaimed writer Mary Baird Bryan—Voorhis, and the recording apparatus that Voorhis had brought along from New Jersey. Bryan’s talent for extemporaneous speaking was already legendary, of course—indeed, the Nebraskan had virtually invented the political stumping tour in the 1896

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presidential race—but for these particular at-home performances, Bryan and his wife had diligently composed and rehearsed the precise words and oratorical rhythms of each speech well in advance.¹ The erstwhile presidential candidate, Voorhis later surmised, was keenly aware that “his words were to be reproduced all over the world in perhaps a million homes”—and the technology that would accomplish that feat demanded that each speech fit neatly into the two-minute recording time afforded by a wax cylinder. Eventually satisfied that he had captured what Thomas Edison later would brand as Bryan’s “wonderful charm of voice and manner,” Voorhis packed his equipment for home, leaving behind a library floor covered in wax shavings that looked like it “had been visited by a snow storm.” Reflecting later on the experience, Voorhis proclaimed: “If I had been the bearer of the crown jewels, I wouldn’t have guarded them more carefully.”²

Harold Voorhis’s sense that his weekend trip to Lincoln portended greater things was prescient. Soon to be gone were the days when candidate speeches would be presented almost exclusively in person as the putatively selfless acts of civic goodwill by reticent public leaders. Instead, candidates for office soon would partner regularly with major media firms—at the time, Edison’s National Phonograph Company, the Victor Talking Machine Company, and Columbia Records—to produce tightly scripted, carefully curated public performances aimed at both cultivating feelings of intimacy with ordinary citizens and crafting appealing and relatable public personas. In that sense, Voorhis’s short trip to Nebraska foreshadowed not only a notable shift in the techniques used for political communications but also a more fundamental transformation in American political campaigning in the early twentieth century, ushering out a paradigm centered on in-person interactions and events in favor of technology-mediated, easily scalable presentations of self that focused on personality and image at least as much as on policy and expertise.³ This shift was not lost on one particularly astute observer at the time, who noted in a 1908 Vermont newspaper that “the phonograph has a present-day value in the way of publicity that almost rivals the press.” Candidate speeches heard by phonograph, this Vermonter continued, “may not convince or convert many voters, but the sound of the human voice carried in this way brings the personality of the speaker very near to the listener, and there is a splendid chance to produce a favorable impression.”⁴

Such early twentieth-century forays by William Jennings Bryan and other presidential candidates into the business of recording and selling speeches marked a critical early step toward the multi-billion dollar media extravaganzas that American voters have come to expect every four years. Yet many have largely overlooked its importance. To be sure, political scientists, historians, and media and communication studies scholars have explored the role more generally of media in presidential campaigning, with most concluding in some manner that newspapers, radio, television, and online communications have influenced campaign tactics and dynamics in numerous and profound ways. Yet few have specifically examined the significance of the phonograph—with its mass appeal, portability, and revolutionary potential

1. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 208–216.

2. “Making the Bryan Records,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 7 (July 1908): 16; ““Ten Edison Records by William Jennings Bryan,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 7 (July 1908): 6.

3. Cohen, *Modern Political Campaigns*, chap. 1; Dunaway and Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, chap. 11.

4. Untitled, *Herald and News*, August 13, 1908, 2.

to create personal connections between candidates and voters—in this story of technology, marketing, and political communication. And even when the impact of Edison’s new recording device has been considered in this context, most have largely confined their analyses to passing observations that the emergence of recorded candidate speeches in 1908 and 1912 signaled a broader shift to more modern campaign tactics.⁵ For instance, political scientist Michael Korzi has noted that use of phonograph recordings by Bryan and William Howard Taft in the 1908 and 1912 presidential contests “undeniably illustrate the growing emphasis on candidates themselves and ‘personality’ in presidential elections.”⁶ Music folklorists Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster have observed political parties and candidates now were part of a broader “recontextualizing [of] public culture to private settings” that was being ushered in by the phonograph’s ability to bring previously public aural experiences into Americans’ homes.⁷ In a similar vein, others have highlighted the use of phonographic recordings and other early media forms as campaign intermediaries or surrogates, emphasizing the phonograph’s ability to divorce the physical presence of the actual speakers from their messages and from their constituents, which put phonograph companies in the position of providing appropriate aural and visual markers into their recordings—a smattering of applause or spoken introduction—to orient listeners to the new experience.⁸

Overlooked in these investigations is a broader historical perspective showing how candidates’ canned speeches helped to bridge competing ideals of campaigning and public leadership that had defined previous eras of American presidential politics. Indeed, throughout most of the eighteenth century, contenders seeking public office were expected to practice a aloofness from the campaigning process befitting of a long-standing republican tradition. A man worthy of election, most assumed, did not have to beg for votes—his character and reputation would speak for him. Yet as the country grew in both population and in geography, a nascent mass democracy challenged this paradigm, effectively forcing presidential contenders to simultaneously adhere to traditional notions of self-restraint and decorum while also seeking to engage with voters arrayed across dozens of states and thousands of miles. By the mid-nineteenth century, the tensions that had developed in Americans’ expectations of their presidential candidates had become quite clear. On the one hand, contenders for the office often maintained that public speaking and soliciting votes could be as hazardous to a political campaign as staying quiet.⁹ Yet Americans increasingly demanded that they be provided with more information about the candidates’ views on the issues and, often, first-hand information about the personal attributes and character of the candidates themselves. Breaking convention, newspaper editor and 1872 presidential nominee Horace Greeley actively stumped for votes by making public speeches in a number of venues and was roundly condemned as the “great American office beggar,” with Democrats attacking his very public record on topics such as vegetarianism, socialism, and spiritualism.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Greeley lost in an electoral college landslide to the incumbent Ulysses S. Grant, who avoided the

5. Teachout, “Running on Wax Cylinders,” W12.

6. Korzi, “William Howard Taft,” 234–241.

7. Bauman and Feaster, “Oratorical Footing in a New Medium,” 1–19.

8. Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 5.

9. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 208–216.

10. Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, 127–129.

public and remained largely silent. As political scientists Richard J. Ellis and Mark Dedrick concluded of those who chose to buck custom, it was clear that “the stump was for losers.”¹¹ Yet for much of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, candidates like Greeley continued to wrestle with the practicalities of mounting a national campaign while appearing both dignified and ambivalent about the process.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the advent of the phonograph presented American presidential aspirants with an opportunity to surmount older eighteenth-century campaigning standards and meet the challenges and demands of an expanding democracy and electorate. Thomas Edison’s 1878 patent was the first for a machine that both captured and played back sound, initially on tinfoil sheets and later on wax cylinders. At first, its potential to transform politics was not obvious; indeed, initially, most Americans saw the phonograph as a little more than a novelty, and Edison’s newfangled invention sat dormant for several years while he focused his energies on perfecting the light bulb. By the late 1880s, though, Edison’s tinkering with his original design yielded a commercially viable model—and Edison then set out to build a market for the product that opened the door for eventual political use. Billed as the Edison New Phonograph, the new device was powered by a hand-cranked spring motor encased in a wooden box. Equipped with a reproducing mechanism controlled by a drive screw that traveled over grooves carved into wax records, Edison’s phonograph transformed those vibrations into sound by passing them through a diaphragm and projecting them by way of a brass horn.¹² Further refinements in design led Edison to introduce his “Home” model phonograph in 1896, for the first time making it possible for American consumers to purchase and play records in the comfort of their own parlors and living rooms.

The Home machine cost approximately \$20—the equivalent of two-week’s salary for an average worker in 1900—while a smaller, less fancy version of the phonograph known as the “Gem” could be had for as little as \$7.50, placing the machine within range of most turn-of-the-century consumers, particularly because both could be bought “on time” with small monthly payments. As with most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century consumer goods, verifiable data regarding precisely who purchased these items and how many were purchased at the time is not available today—but by some estimates, Edison alone sold nearly 1.3 million phonographs for entertainment and business purposes between 1889 and 1909, and U.S. census data suggest that annual production by all manufacturers increased from approximately 150,000 phonographs in 1899 to 345,00 in 1909. What is more, by 1909, Edison’s factory in Orange, New Jersey, was reportedly cranking out 75,000 cylinder records per day, featuring an array of audio programming—including John Philip Sousa tunes, educational lectures, comedic skits, grand oratories, and other popular programs—to keep up with public demand.¹³ Long before radios became commonplace in American sitting rooms, it seems, the phonograph had emerged by the early post–World War I period as a widely popular and accessible way for people across the nation to bring the sounds of public entertainment, discourse, and exploration into their own homes.

11. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 210.

12. Brady, *A Spiral Way*, 20–23.

13. Dyer and Martin, “Edison’s Inventions,” 211; Atack and Bateman, “Physical Output of Selected Manufactured Products: 1860–1997.”

Undoubtedly, it was this wide accessibility to the public's ear through the phonograph that captured the imagination of candidates looking for fresh ways to reach more voters. Edison's invention—and its corresponding records—arguably was the first mechanical media technology to find its way into political campaigning on a mass scale. Preserved on wax cylinders and packaged in cardboard tubes, canned speeches were poised to become a marketable alternative to soliciting ballots in person while also facilitating a candidate's direct engagement with voters. As early as 1900, when William Jennings Bryan initially dabbled in using the phonograph as part of his first unsuccessful presidential bid, observers proclaimed that recorded speeches signaled “a complete revolution in campaigning methods.”¹⁴ Sold for thirty-five cents each (approximately \$8 in today's money), recorded talks enabled nominees to steer clear of the public-speaking minefield while appearing to communicate more intimately with constituents in their homes. In this way, wax cylinders (and the increasingly popular discs manufactured by Columbia Records and the Victor Talking Machine Company) expanded political oratory to include both public places and private spaces.¹⁵ Recorded speeches likewise enabled contenders to curate personas that were sold both commercially and at the polls.¹⁶ With the assistance of phonograph companies, presidential candidates literally packaged themselves for consumption, helping nominees navigate what had become an uneasy relationship with a voting public locked into expectations of restrained silence befitting the dignity of the office but who also wanted to hear directly from the candidates.¹⁷

From Porches to Parlors: The Evolution of Presidential Campaigning

In 1877, when Thomas Edison first claimed to have sketched out a design for what would become the phonograph, presidential campaigning had changed relatively little since the turn of the century. The 1876 battle between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden that would sound the death knell to Reconstruction was fought largely in silence so as to avoid the appearance by either candidate of electioneering. Hayes disavowed even the idea of voting for himself; Tilden, meanwhile, took pains to declare publicly his disinterest in the whole affair—even as his running mate, Thomas Hendricks of Indiana, was sent on the road to woo voters and party loyalists on the ticket's behalf.¹⁸ Some voters undoubtedly were dismayed at the seeming lack of engagement by both candidates, but the appearance of detachment from the process was viewed by most campaign managers of the time as the safest path to the White House. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, candidates who tried alternative approaches routinely were condemned either for appearing indifferent or for enthusiastically stumping, sometimes in the same campaign. William Henry Harrison, for example, spent much of the 1840 election at his Ohio home until Democrats

14. “Talking Machine in Politics,” *Phonoscope* 4, no. 2 (February 1900): 6.

15. Korzi notes that while both Bryan and Taft recorded speeches for Victor and Columbia on Emile Berliner's gramophone discs, they “were largely duplicative of the Edison ones and also were not as well-advertised,” making cylinders the more popular and notable medium. Korzi, “William Howard Taft,” 236.

16. Bauman and Feaster, “Oratorical Footing in a New Medium,” 10.

17. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 208–216.

18. Stoner, *Campaign Crossroads*, 69.

began baiting him by calling him an “Old Granny” and “General Mum,” implying that he was too delicate for the presidency. Yet when Harrison shifted his strategy and launched a three-week speaking tour, he then was compelled to defend himself against accusations that he was begging for votes.¹⁹ Between 1840 and 1872, only one of five candidates who undertook an active speaking tour successfully won the office, making clear the seeming futility of employing such aggressive politicking tactics.²⁰ By the end of the century, the contradictions inherent in trying to remain reserved while also addressing the voting public’s growing interest in learning where candidates stood on the issues repeatedly stymied contenders for the office.

One solution came in the form of the front-porch campaign, an innovation generally credited to James A. Garfield during his 1880 bid for the presidency. Rather than stumping across the country, Garfield instead invited delegations to converge on his front lawn. Between June and October, Garfield entertained nearly seventeen thousand visitors—shipped in by the railroad carload—at his Ohio home. Benjamin Harrison employed the same tactic in 1888, with “immence [*sic*] delegations of Hosiers and suckers,” as one Kansas newspaper reported, marching from the train station to his house in Indianapolis, Indiana, to hear Harrison speak on topics such as tariffs and other fiscal policies, along with more folksy talk about the importance of home.²¹ Front-porch campaigning allowed candidates to distance themselves from the unseemliness of mounting an aggressive speaking tour while directly addressing supporters eager to know candidates on a more personal level. It was a tactic focused on cultivating presidential contenders not just as politicians but also as personalities, men who were approachable and knowable beyond the party line. When nine hundred Cleveland businessmen traveled to Garfield’s homestead in October 1880, they not only heard the Republican’s thoughts on racial equality, but they also toured Garfield’s orchard and met both his wife and his mother before gathering souvenir apples for the trip home.²²

Front-porch campaigns proved successful for Republicans, with Garfield and Harrison, in addition to William McKinley in 1896 and Warren Harding in 1920, each winning the presidency from the comfort and convenience of their own residences. As an alternative strategy, front-porch electioneering also signaled a transition in politicking from a purely public pursuit to one that now extended to the intimacy of domestic spaces. Linking notions of integrity and the private virtues that “home” represented in most discourse on classical republicanism, candidates, it seemed, had found an effective alternative to the silent campaign that met democratic expectations.²³ The problem, however, was that while front-porch campaigning was effective, it was also limited in its reach. Improvements in transportation—namely the railroad—had made it easier and faster to travel longer distances, yet few Americans had either the time or the resources to make routine pilgrimages to presidential candidates’ homes. The 350,000 people who trekked to Indianapolis in 1888 to see Benjamin Harrison represented

19. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 211.

20. Bourdon, *From Garfield to Harding*, 1–9.

21. “By the Thousands,” *Wichita Eagle*, August 15, 1888, 1; “General Harrison to the Farmers,” *Portland Daily Press*, September, 22, 1888, 1; “Truths from Gen. Harrison,” *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, September 20, 1888, 1.

22. “900 Business Men of the City of Cleveland Visit Gen. Garfield at His Home,” *Highland Weekly News*, October 28, 1880, 1.

23. Wood, “Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution,” 22–29.

only 0.5 percent of the country's approximately sixty million residents and only 3 percent of the nearly eleven million ballots cast in the November election. How could major party candidates reach voters beyond their front doors while also maintaining the appearance of being indifferent to campaigning?²⁴

This was the challenge that William Jennings Bryan and other presidential aspirants faced by the end of the nineteenth century. Bryan, however, was never one to concern himself with looking disengaged from the political process. His groundbreaking 1896 whistle-stop tour covered eighteen thousand railroad track miles in three months, with the dynamic Democratic nominee making six hundred speeches to approximately five million people, largely about the silver standard.²⁵ Bryan's apparent willingness to try more aggressive campaigning methods is likely the reason why U.S. senator James Jones, chair of the Democratic National Committee, was approached in 1896 about "buying or renting" phonographs and "putting them to work for the Democratic ticket." Bryan and "other silver speakers," according to the proposal, could record "10 or 15 minute speeches for enrollment on the cylinders" to be "taken and put in machines which will be sent all over the country."²⁶ While the technology did not allow for the recording of long speeches—two minutes was the most that could be captured at that time (by 1908, it doubled to four minutes)—the United States Phonograph Company, one of the industry's largest record producers in the 1890s, listed four recordings by William Jennings Bryan in its 1896 catalog (along with one McKinley speech), including Bryan's famous "Crown of Thorns and Cross of Gold Speech." The idea of sending this recorded representation of Bryan across the country via mechanical reproduction quickly gained traction. "Friends of the great silver candidate," as one Oregon newspaper reported, "will be permitted to hear reproduced the actual tones of their candidate's voice, interrupted cheers, laughter, and applause," making the event "a wonderful treat to anyone."²⁷

His Master's Voice? Surmounting the Limits of Live Recording

Americans who turned up at events in 1896 to hear Bryan or McKinley speak through the phonograph, however, were being bamboozled. The wax cylinders produced by the United States Phonograph Company actually reproduced neither Bryan's nor McKinley's voice; instead, they presented only the vocal stylings of a talented imitator who performed selected excerpts from the candidates' most notable past orations. Further advancing the fraud, the company included simulated crowd noise into these recordings, so as to persuade unsuspecting home audiences that the "candidates" had been captured "live" in front of adoring crowds. So why did the firm engage in such deception? Probably because the recording technology available in the 1890s simply did not allow the recording of the actual candidates speaking on the stump in their own voices. Indeed, speakers looking to preserve their discourse on cylinders had to talk directly and forcefully into the end of a long horn to ensure that their

24. Woolley and Peters, "1888."

25. Korzi, "William Howard Taft," 230.

26. Untitled, *National Tribune*, August 20, 1896, 5.

27. "Who Made It," *State Rights Democrat*, September 18, 1896, 5.

voices cut clearly and deeply into the wax. Speeches delivered to a live audience were not loud or distinct enough to make the necessary impressions into the cylinders. The inability to mass produce cylinders in these early days likely also played a role in the large number of sound-alike cylinders entering the market to meet demand and interest.²⁸

Given these technological limitations, some immediately questioned the veracity of the purported “live” recordings; for instance, an Oregon event promoter in 1896, in a newspaper blurb entitled “Who Made It,” appeared to question openly whether listeners of the wax recordings really would be hearing from “the Boy Orator of the Platte.”²⁹ Investigating further, the *Chicago Chronicle* pulled back the curtain to reveal that “an actor is engaged at a good salary to do little else than repeat stirring passages from Bryan’s speeches all day long,” while “a crowd of supernumeraries, with a captain, is employed to do the cheering, the terrific applause and the long-continued applause.”³⁰ Yet most Americans either did not realize or did not care that the stirring voices that they heard were neither Bryan’s nor McKinley’s. Political clubs, local government officials, and even churches promoted the cylinders as a chance to listen to the men themselves, with one congregation encouraging its parishioners: “You had better go out and hear McKinley and Bryan speak.”³¹ In this case, the content of the recorded speeches and the uniqueness of the listening experience itself appeared to matter more to voters than “who” was speaking.

Nevertheless, this 1896 introduction of “Bryan” and “McKinley” on the phonograph enabled the candidates to discuss the issues—and connect directly with voters—while avoiding the appearance of overt canvassing and politicking. More broadly, McKinley’s successful front-porch campaign, enhanced both by the phonograph and by a Republican Party-supported moving picture entitled *McKinley at Home*—a silent film that depicted McKinley striding about his gardens in top hat and frock coat—demonstrated how presidential contenders could employ the latest media technology to bridge the divide between the politics of the past and the politics of the future.³² At the same time, however, Bryan and McKinley also drew criticism from several quarters for their association with the phonograph. Indeed, the term “phonograph” itself began to be employed as a derogatory term, useful in mocking both candidates for a lack of spontaneity and a lack of authenticity. “The days are not long enough now for William Phonograph Bryan to make speeches,” one Los Angeles newspaper lampooned the often long-winded orator, while another Arizona paper bluntly reported, “The press of the country are exhausting the vocabulary. They call him phonograph Bryan nowadays.”³³ McKinley faced even sharper critiques, with Democrats and others referring

28. As the owner of a 1906 Edison Home model phonograph, Susan Spellman has experimented with recording on wax cylinders and found that a speaker needs to stand very close to the recording horn and talk with a loud, powerful voice to ensure that the reproducer needle cuts clear and distinct grooves into the surface of the record. It requires a delicate balance, because speaking with too much force creates “blast,” a distortion in the grooves that muddles speech on playback, while talking too softly fails to etch the wax sufficiently, resulting in a loss of recording quality; Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 31.

29. “Who Made It,” *State Rights Democrat*, September 18, 1896, 5.

30. “Oratory for One Nickel,” *Chicago Chronicle*, October 18, 1896, 33.

31. “McKinley and Bryan at the M.E. Church,” *Adams Globe*, October 23, 1896, 1.

32. Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 105-14.

33. “Political Points,” *Evening Express*, September 24, 1896, 4; Untitled, *Weekly Journal-Miner*, September 30, 1896, 2.

to him as “Mark Hanna’s Phonograph,” a reference to McKinley’s campaign manager, a wealthy Cleveland businessman who often was credited with being the political genius behind the Republican’s two successful White House bids. “McKinley is little better than a stuffed manikin,” the *Pittsburgh Post* scoffed in 1896, “with Hanna pulling the wires.”³⁴ Presidential candidates, these critics suggested, had become little more than human phonographs, simply repeating ad infinitum their words and messages along with the viewpoints of others. Caught between the long-standing conviction that White House contenders fared better by remaining silent and the voting public’s growing demands to hear more from the candidates, men like Bryan and McKinley walked a fine line between employing the phonograph in their campaigns without adopting the persona of the machine itself. One solution, however, was to reimagine the phonograph as a mechanical surrogate, a proxy for the nominees themselves.

The Phonograph as Middleman

As an intermediary between presidential candidates and the voting public, the phonograph joined a long line of campaign surrogates, individuals designated by the candidates and their managers to represent contenders’ positions on the main issues. Surrogates frequently substituted for nominees at rallies, political clubs, and other public events, with the press serving as the primary communication link between candidate and electorate by relaying the content and tone of the messages they heard.³⁵ The advantages of employing phonographs as mechanical surrogates, some believed, derived from the potential for more accurately representing politicians’ positions on the issues. “The newspapers are filled with conflicting reports of what Bryan says in his political speeches,” one Kentucky phonograph dealer’s advertisement read, “but you can know for certain by hearing these records made by Bryan himself.”³⁶ Others saw in canned speeches an opportunity to eliminate journalistic flourishes and “save the intelligent reader who is trying to follow a presidential campaign the brain-racking labor of plowing through seven columns of words to find the three quarter of a column of argument and facts there in [*sic*] buried.”³⁷ The technological limitations of phonograph cylinders compelled speakers to edit their speeches to conform to the 120 seconds of recording time, forcing candidates to cut superfluous language and focus on their core messages. The resulting records are condensed and to the point, even if some have odd starting and stopping points or uncontextualized utterances depending on the skill with which speakers either cut snippets from old talks or reformulated new language to accommodate the technology.³⁸ Regardless of the outcome, these early cylinders were in many ways the first recorded political sound bites.

By the time the 1908 election rolled around, Bryan recognized in canned speeches a fresh opportunity to expand his reach to millions of voters across the country via mechanical

34. “Mark Hanna’s Phonograph,” *Pittsburgh Post*, October 24, 1896, 4.

35. Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 27.

36. “Wm. J. Bryan Speaks in a Million Homes,” *Breckenridge News*, July 8, 1908, 5.

37. “Canned Speeches,” *Ottumwa Tri-Weekly Courier*, September 5, 1908, 3.

38. Bauman and Feaster, “Oratorical Footing in a New Medium,” 15–16.

surrogate. While Bryan had recorded excerpts both in 1896 and from his 1900 Indianapolis presidential bid acceptance speech, few of the resulting cylinders appear to have made their way into widespread circulation despite predictions printed around the country that his orations “as ground out by the phonograph will play an important part in the campaign.”³⁹ Eight years later, though, Bryan made short recorded talks an integral element of his third White House bid. Altogether, he produced ten, two-minute cylinders, each covering a key political issue of the day, such as “The Labor Question,” “Popular Election of Senators,” “Guaranty of Bank Deposits,” and “The Trust Question.” Journalists acknowledged the obvious advantages of disseminating a candidate’s views and platform in this manner, noting that “‘canned’ speeches by statesmen and spellbinders will be available for use in every town, village and hamlet in the country”—thus making nominees’ positions on key topics readily available nationwide while also minimizing the demands on candidates’ own time and financial resources.⁴⁰ Bryan may have had additional motivations beyond vote-getting for canning his speeches, though, as he received \$500 from both Edison and another firm for his efforts. When the public learned that the staunch anti-monopoly candidate had profited from two large corporations, Bryan immediately announced that he had donated the money to the Democratic campaign fund to avoid further accusations of impropriety, quickly dousing a potential political firestorm.⁴¹ What remained unclear, though, was whether voters would settle for hearing reproductions of Bryan’s speeches rather than hearing directly from the Democratic presidential candidate himself. At the same time, much of the public was still reticent at the notion that electioneering befitted presidential contenders, a point Republicans took advantage of by castigating Bryan for his prior whistle-stop tours. “When I went out campaigning in 1896 and 1900,” the Democrat maintained, “they said it was demagogic to ‘run around over the country hunting for votes.’” Bryan further expounded, “When I made some phonograph records in order that I might discuss political questions before more people, the Republican papers ridiculed me and called it undignified.”⁴² An early adopter of the newest media technology, Bryan was an easy target for his political enemies, who lambasted him for defying long-standing traditions in favor of widespread electioneering.

It was not until William Howard Taft consented in 1908 to record his own speeches that Republicans stopped mocking Bryan for his use of the phonograph. It was a moment Bryan played up to the press. “The Republicans seem bent on imitating not only our platform but our campaign methods,” Bryan complained, before noting that there was “some advantage in the fact that we are setting the pattern this year.”⁴³ Newspapers around the country fanned the irony with sarcasm now that Taft had “elevate[d] the phonograph to an eminence befitting recognition from candidates for the presidency by talking to one himself.”⁴⁴ Bryan supporters in turn savaged Taft for his earlier talk about running a campaign “of ‘dignity and reserve,’” only later to announce an aggressive whistle-stop tour in addition to canning his speeches

39. “Bryan and the Phonograph,” *Daily Sentinel*, August 14, 1900, 1.

40. “Canned Campaign Speeches,” *Star and Newark Advertiser*, July 22, 1908, 8.

41. “Theodore A. Bell Talks on Issues of Campaign,” *Los Angeles Herald*, September 10, 1908, 3.

42. “Mr. Taft Takes the Stump,” *The Commoner*, September 11, 1908, 7.

43. “Press Made Fun of Him,” *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, August 5, 1908, 2.

44. “‘Coppering’ Their Bets,” *The Newspaper*, September 25, 1908, 6.

when it appeared that Bryan had gained an advantage in the polls. “After bloviating for ten or twelve years about Mr. Bryan’s undignified methods of campaigning, and for weeks pointing with pride to the fact that their candidate would ‘observe the proprieties’ and would not ‘belittle the dignity of a candidate for such high office,’” Democrats crowed, “the republican [*sic*] managers fearing and trembling, have abandoned that high and mighty position.”⁴⁵ With both leading presidential candidates mounting extensive speaking and phonograph campaigns—forsaking the image of propriety in the quest for votes—Bryan and Taft together challenged the long-standing public conviction that the best man for the office remained silent. Candidates and their campaign managers now recognized the potential for recorded speeches to make their way into political clubs, churches, and the homes of thousands nationwide. The untapped value of potentially converting wax cylinders into votes had proven too tempting for even the staunchest of campaign Luddites. Shortly after the Republican Taft announced his forthcoming phonograph recordings and new focus on actively stumping, Democratic campaign managers summed up the fresh significance of the 1908 election by claiming, “It means that apathy will be at an end for the remainder of the campaign.”⁴⁶

Selling Presidential Candidates for Fun and Profit

While the candidates focused on the political value of these recordings, Thomas Edison understood clearly that canned political speeches by the major presidential candidates held significant commercial potential as well. To be sure, a few other entrepreneurs already had tried to capitalize on the celebrity status of prior White House candidates. For instance, the 1896 “Bryan” and “McKinley” cylinders discussed earlier, recorded and disseminated by the United States Phonograph Company, could be heard in phonograph parlors across the nation where listeners could choose from a wall lined with machines rigged to play a single record for a nickel—precursors to modern jukeboxes. Eartubes, primitive earphones attached to each player, ensured a somewhat-private experience. In one Chicago storefront, “Bryan’s speeches and McKinley’s melancholy disquisitions” battled with comedic songs and minstrel skits for customers, earning “about \$40 a day for the shop.” Bryan, “being the livelier boy,” garnered approximately \$25, while McKinley, “being a trifle slow,” picked up the other \$15. Twenty years earlier, when the machines first appeared, one New Yorker bragged of earning upward of \$25 per week from curious customers willing to drop a nickel and listen to any number of popular songs, sendups, and elocutions.⁴⁷ The \$40 per day reported by the Chicago vendor therefore appears to represent an extraordinary uptick in interest, particularly for a by-then commonplace instrument. Perhaps more important than the actual dollars spent was that both candidates’ cylinders were reported to be “far more popular than the comic singers, and ‘beat’ the negro minstrels by a large majority,” suggesting the entertainment potential of popular

45. “From the Center of Things,” *Valentine Democrat*, October 1, 1908, 1.

46. “Bryan Tour Longer,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 1908, 1.

47. Untitled, *Brooklyn Life* 3, no. 54 (March 14, 1891): 5.

politics.⁴⁸ Phonograph parlors also proved a democratic method for disseminating the candidates' messages, as one New York City newsman observed after watching a woman listening to a Bryan cylinder while a black man "had at his ears the earpieces of a machine in which Mr. Taft set forth his views on the 'Rights and Progress of the Negro.'" Not long after, the journalist noted, "a white man listened at the same phonograph."⁴⁹

Other independent recording firms had tried selling Bryan and McKinley cylinders to American voters as well. For instance, the North American Phonograph Company offered consumers a recording by "the distinguished Republican Nominee at Canton [Ohio]," talking on "The Threat to Debase the National Currency"—although, like those produced by its market competitor, the recording actually featured only a simulated "live" speech delivered by a voice actor backed by artificial crowd noise added to provide atmosphere.⁵⁰ Yet most of these early records found their way only into penny arcades and political clubs, with very few ending up in the hands of consumers. At the same time, some saw great potential in the phonograph for increasing voters' familiarity with the candidates. "Only a small fraction of the men that will vote in November have ever heard or seen the great leaders," one writer noted, "and the phonograph, it is thought, would make a very satisfactory substitute."⁵¹ Still others saw in canned speeches an opportunity to draw crowds to their commercial ventures, such as Philadelphia outfitters Gately and Hurley, who invited customers to their store by adding "an extra dash of spice into business ... with a free Phonographic entertainment," which included the playing of Bryan's "Cross of Gold" and McKinley's "Gold Speech at Canton."⁵² Savvy political observers did not miss the ways in which the phonograph had begun to make presidential campaigning "a commercial commodity."⁵³ The exploitation of political candidates by corporations may have surprised some who questioned the blurring of those lines in favor of maintaining a clear and distinct divide between the nation's political leaders and crass commercialism, but few could argue that Edison had started down a path earlier recording firms had started to pave in the 1890s.

The distribution of canned speeches largely to phonograph parlors, however, ultimately limited the reach and impact of candidates' messages. At that time, duplicate cylinders were generated by having a speaker or musicians recite a speech or play a tune repeatedly while multiple phonographs simultaneously captured the recording. "By this process," an 1892 newspaper article explained, "if a large number of cylinders are needed, the music is simply repeated as many times as is necessary," making it virtually impossible for any candidate to have produced enough cylinders on their own to satisfy a large demand had there been one.⁵⁴ As a result, there was no home market for canned speeches in 1896. By 1900, however, it appears that several campaign records were available to consumers, including eleven advertised by the MacGowan Cycle Company of New Haven, Connecticut. Several songs supported each candidate, including "You Can't Keep McKinley from the Chair" and the generically

48. "Oratory for One Nickel," *Chicago Chronicle*, October 18, 1896, 33.

49. "Personal and Pertinent," *Evening Journal*, October 1, 1908, 4.

50. Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 113.

51. "Phonographs in Politics," *Chicago Chronicle*, September 19, 1896, 11.

52. Gately and Hurley advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 4, 1896, 7.

53. "Phonograph in Politics," *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 1896, 41.

54. "Phonograph Cylinders," *Helena Independent*, September 28, 1892, 3.

titled “Democratic Campaign Song.” A few disquisitions also made their way into the mix, such as “Bryan’s Speech to Labor,” “McKinley’s Letter of Acceptance,” and “Roosevelt’s Speech to Labor,” but none of the speakers named had recorded their own words. Roosevelt in particular was reluctant to employ the phonograph for campaign use and would remain a staunch holdout for years, as he viewed a sitting president stumping for votes to be unseemly.⁵⁵ At a cost of fifty cents per cylinder, however, supporters of either McKinley or Bryan likely would have found the price, while average for a phonograph record in 1900, nevertheless a bit of a stretch, especially as they offered limited entertainment and contained subject matter that would be largely insignificant after the election. Indeed, the lack of apparent widespread advertising and the small number of surviving recordings from the 1900 campaign suggest that few retailers stocked the cylinders and even fewer consumers rushed to buy either the speeches or the songs for home use.⁵⁶

Never one to miss a money-making opportunity, Thomas Edison saw in the hotly contested 1908 presidential campaign the potential to turn wax into gold. Significantly, Edison had engineered a process for mass-producing wax cylinders in 1902 referred to as “Gold Moulded” because of the small amount of the metal employed in creating a cast mold from the wax master recording. This made possible the large-scale manufacturing and shipping of presidential candidates’ speeches to shops and to consumers across the country. It was, in many ways, part of Edison’s vision for the phonograph from the invention’s very conception. “It will henceforth be possible to preserve for future generations the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones,” Edison proclaimed in 1878, suggesting the humanitarian benefits of capturing and preserving the world’s greatest speakers on wax.⁵⁷ Yet it was the promise of not just hearing the century’s best orators, but doing so without having to travel to a great hall or other distant venue that held Edison’s attention thirty years later.

Indeed, one journalist in Washington, DC, explained, “Not everyone cares to go to the theater to be entertained by the phonograph,” especially when it came to politics. Shortly after Edison announced the forthcoming Bryan cylinders in June 1908, the intrepid reporter pointed out—tongue in cheek—“another imminent innovation” in presidential campaigning, that of “the home stump,” whereby the “phonograph owner being generously eager to share his pet pleasure with the whole neighborhood,” opens his window “and starts a home rally.”⁵⁸ In shifting public discourse into private settings, Edison—along with Victor, Columbia, and several other independent record companies—helped democratize, domesticate, and commercialize presidential campaigning on a mass scale, changing the landscape of politics in new and profound ways. No longer would voters need to travel to candidates’ front porches, to phonograph parlors, or to crowded halls to hear White House contenders speak. Men or women, regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status, in theory could now hear their candidate of choice (and the opposition) in their own parlors, bringing personal consumption

55. Ellis and Dedrick, “The Presidential Candidate,” 208–216.

56. Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 152–153; MacGowan Cycle Company advertisement, *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier*, October 30, 1900, 8. A search of national newspapers on the Chronicling America website (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>) suggests that the MacGowan Company may be one of the few firms that advertised the cylinders for sale.

57. “Phonograph,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 4, 1878, 4.

58. “Stump, Stump, Everywhere,” *Washington Times*, June 27, 1908, 6.

into alignment with citizenship.⁵⁹ Edison emphasized the democracy of his phonographs and the ability for all Americans not only to own a machine but also to benefit from the civic lessons and entertainment they provided. In the years following the 1908 election, presidential campaigning increasingly dovetailed with the emerging notion of the citizen-consumer, redefining voters both as constituents and consumers who cast their ballots at the polls as well as in the shops.⁶⁰

It is possible, though, that those who solicited presidential candidates for their recorded speeches had motivations beyond monetary gains. Given the objectionable characterization of the phonograph's early political usage, however, it would be an overstatement to suggest that recording firms in 1908 engaged in "influence peddling" by calling on leading candidates to can their speeches. After all, while Bryan may have been an eager participant, both Taft and Roosevelt took considerable convincing before stepping up to the recording horn. Looking more closely at Edison's political leanings, moreover, it would seem counterintuitive for the lifelong pro-business Republican to work overtime promoting Bryan's platform—which strongly criticized corporate power and trusts—for political gains. Indeed, one biographer noted that while Edison was known to be informed about national politics, he was not "particularly concerned with them."⁶¹ On the other hand, his relentless pursuit of Taft might be seen as a political maneuver. Rarely one to comment publicly about his party leanings, Edison provided a glimpse of his position in 1908 during a train ride to Yellowstone by suggesting that while the whole of the East would vote for Taft, "there was nothing practical to be gained by gratifying Mr. Bryan's ambition to preside at the whitehouse [*sic*]."⁶² Four years later, he would pitch the idea of recording Taft on Kinetophone—Edison's early attempt to combine moving images and sound into a single medium—for use as a "campaign machine" by the Republican National Committee. Where Edison saw in the Kinetophone an opportunity to educate sixty million theatergoing voters, Taft preferred instead to stump and declined the offer, which potentially cost him the election.⁶³ Edison, meanwhile, had come out in support of Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Party. While it is unknown whether Taft's snub drove Edison from the Republican candidate, it nevertheless marked the only time the inventor swayed from his loyalty to the GOP. In the end, while some may have pursued canning presidential candidates in exchange for currying political favors, Edison's primary motivations in 1908 appear to have been promoting his phonograph and enriching his bottom line.

Having secured both Bryan's and Taft's speeches on cylinders, Edison set to advertising and selling them to the American public. With the assistance of Calkins and Holden, the National Phonograph Company's publicity agents, Edison unleashed a flood of stories across the country resulting in "an extraordinary interest" in the recordings, according to writers for *Printers' Ink*, a leading advertisers' journal.⁶⁴ Utilizing his in-house publication, the *Edison Phonograph Monthly*, he further instructed record retailers and wholesalers on how to push the records to consumers. "The making of Records by two Presidential candidates is the most

59. Bauman and Feaster, "Oratorical Footing in a New Medium," 2.

60. McGovern, *Sold American*, 100–101.

61. Morris, *Edison*, 161.

62. "Views of Thomas Edison," *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, September 3, 1908, 8.

63. Morris, *Edison*, 144–145.

64. Haire, "Canning Speeches," 4.

remarkable thing that has happened in phonography in the last five years,” one September 1908 piece intoned, “Every Edison Dealer should take advantage of it.”⁶⁵ Sample window display signs were packaged with large portraits of Taft and Bryan (“Everyone will know who they are”) along with detailed instructions on how to arrange them to draw a crowd. “Get ready with your silver-tongued oratory, and your genial smile to talk to Democrats and Republicans, and a Populist or two, and one Prohibitionist,” Edison publicists encouraged, portending the growing links between salesmanship and popular politics.⁶⁶

Given the widespread potential for the records to expand the reach of a contender’s campaign, journalists and others were keen to gauge their impact. “Multiply the Candidate,” read one Edison advertisement, making clear the conceivable ties between cylinders and votes.⁶⁷ One Connecticut daily, quoting an Edison representative, claimed, “The people have no conception of the demand for these so-called ‘canned speeches.’” Advance orders for the thirty-five-cent records topped 130,000 for June 1908 delivery to phonograph dealers, with October sales estimates in excess of 600,000.⁶⁸ Edison’s Gold Moulded process not only had accelerated record production, it also had reduced costs, a benefit he passed on to consumers in the form of lower cylinder prices. Assuming the figures were accurate, Bryan’s records alone would have amounted to over \$210,000 in sales, making the records “among the best sellers of the Edison library,” at least according to the company’s hype.⁶⁹ *Printers’ Ink* calculated that if Bryan or Taft had stumped from July through November making two speeches per day, six days a week, while speaking to an audience of three hundred on each occasion, they each would have addressed only fifty thousand voters, or five one-hundredths of the American voting population. The journal estimated that both candidates, by “canning” their speeches, “could have taken a restful pleasure trip to Europe and at the same time have carried on a vigorous, ‘personally-conducted’ campaign, reaching at least fifty million persons, or more than 50 percent of the population of this country.” Further linking consumption to citizenship, *Printers’ Ink* writers speculated that sales might be used to track voter interest in each candidate, noting that “Texas is one of the heaviest consumers of the Bryan records,” with the Democrat eventually (if unsurprisingly) winning that state’s electoral college votes.⁷⁰

Commodifying Personality

Key to Edison’s advertising blitz was the notion that voters could invite the candidates into their own salons and music rooms. “Hear Mr. Bryan’s voice right in your own home!” a September 1908 ad blasted from the pages of big- and small-town newspapers across the country, suggesting that the Democratic nominee would be speaking directly to

65. “What Bryan and Taft Advertising Means for You,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 9 (September 1908): 8.

66. “Selling Records Through Your Window,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 9 (September 1908): 10.

67. “Multiply the Candidate,” National Phonograph Company advertisement, *The Commoner*, August 28, 1908, 14.

68. Haire, “Canning Speeches,” 6.

69. *Ibid.*, 6.

70. *Ibid.*, 3.

consumer-citizens. The same advertisement posted by a Chicago-based Edison distributor in Bryan's own newspaper, *The Commoner*, went on to claim, "Mr. William Jennings Bryan Wants to Talk to You Personally," evoking the notion that voters could enjoy greater intimacy with the potential next president through home consumption of his speeches. "Every modulation of his magnificent voice is heard. Every syllable, every tone, every word is as plain as if coming direct from the lips of Mr. Bryan."⁷¹ Fighting crowds for the chance just to glimpse one's favored candidate let alone struggling to hear him speak before the widespread and reliable use of public address systems was a far cry from the intimate experience a listener now could enjoy with Bryan or Taft. The "personally-conducted" campaign the phonograph provided exceeded even the familiarity and long-standing tradition of reprinted speeches read around the dining table or in the neighborhood tavern. "It is true that the newspapers report the speeches of politicians of importance, but they can only give the cold words in type, shorn of the personality, voice and inflection of the orator," a Virginia journalist conceded.⁷² Indeed, Bryan's clear and vibrant recordings allowed careful listeners to pick up on the slight whistle in his speech pattern, a vocal characteristic few would have detected in an auditorium. Edison's gamble that voters now could "know" the man who would be president was central to his sales pitch and relied on an as-yet untested assumption that the voting public wanted to learn more about the man in the White House beyond his stance on political issues.⁷³

Packaging Bryan and Taft for voter consumption, Edison—along with other phonograph and gramophone executives—helped commodify presidential candidates. While individual character had played a part in campaigning since the 1830s, political scientists have noted that the election of 1908 signaled an increased focus on personality politics, with both major party candidates stumping nationwide for the first time.⁷⁴ With the Democratic and Republican nominees evenly matched on a number of issues—indeed, Taft undercut Bryan's "progressive" stance by adopting a similar position on several key points—attention largely centered on getting to know the man who would become the next president. Newspapers and magazine editors spun stories about each of the candidates at home, his daily habits, and his comings and goings—the minutiae that exposes elements of a man's character. Because canned speeches literally would do the speaking for both candidates, their voices and the ways in which they delivered their messages were as important as the messages themselves. "To hear the cadences of the voice, to recognize its peculiarities, to feel that the candidates' message comes direct to you," the Boston-based *National Magazine* rhapsodized, "creates a distinctly personal interest in the man himself."⁷⁵ In selling Bryan and Taft to the American people, Edison leaned heavily into the notion that you not only could come to "know" the man in the White House by studying the inflections in his voice, but that you also could have a personal relationship with him. "You can hear the NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES," a National Phonograph Company ad enthusiastically proclaimed, "just as though

71. F.K. Babson advertisement, *The Commoner*, September 11, 1909, 16.

72. "Bryan's Voice to Reach Millions," *Stanton Spectator and Vindicator*, July 17, 1908, 1.

73. Korzi, "William Howard Taft," 241. Timothy Taylor notes that player pianos, which emerged in the same era as phonographs, likewise were marketed as "democratizing" machines, capable of erasing class distinctions between "cultured" and "uncultured" individuals. Taylor, "Commodification of Music," 289

74. Korzi, "William Howard Taft," 235–242.

75. "Records of the Month," *National Magazine* 29, no. 1 (October 1908): 112.

he were standing right in front of you, talking to *you, personally*.”⁷⁶ Indeed, Edison was so convinced that the public would want to develop a sense of intimacy with their favorite candidate that he used the Bryan and Taft recordings to hawk free trials of his phonograph, certain that once customers heard Bryan and Taft in their own homes they would pay two dollars per month to keep the machine and the cylinders and “*get acquainted*” with the nominees.⁷⁷

Edison doubled down on selling Bryan’s and Taft’s personalities by also distributing several nonpolitical speeches intended to provide the public with a sense of each man’s individual character. Possibly in an attempt to sway the nation’s Irish vote, Taft’s “Irish Humor” recording had nothing to do with the Republican Party’s platform or its candidate’s position on the issues, but rather demonstrated Taft’s genial nature as he—ironically without humor—recited poetry and described a trip to Ireland where he visited Cork and kissed the Blarney Stone. Meanwhile, Bryan’s “Immortality” record pulled from his popular “The Prince of Peace” lyceum lecture, which regularly drew large national and international crowds in the years before his 1908 White House run.⁷⁸ Edison undoubtedly recognized the commercial potential in canning the Democrat’s well-known oratory, now largely stripped of its original anti-imperialism message to focus instead on the metaphoric life cycle of wheat grains discovered in Egyptian tombs. Linking Bryan’s personality and his interest in life after death to his leadership potential, Edison pitchmen puffed that “Mr. Bryan is evidently as profound a thinker upon such questions as upon those affecting the country’s political welfare.” Such colorful hype helped make Bryan’s “Immortality” cylinder, despite its obvious lack of connection to the issues, “the best seller of them all,” according to *Printer’s Ink*.⁷⁹

In addition to commodifying the candidates’ personalities, Edison and his team also played a part in cultivating their images for public consumption. While phonograph recording technology had been around for three decades, professional artists largely dominated the industry, with some home users buying the extra equipment needed to preserve their voices on brown wax cylinders. Bryan had prior experience from his 1900 attempt to produce campaign records, but most political candidates had not stepped up to the long, narrow recording horn used to capture speeches. This complicated Edison’s task of securing money-making performances from both major party candidates, as talking into a phonograph was markedly different from the kind of public speaking to which the nominees had grown accustomed. Recording forced Bryan and Taft to stand in one spot, modulate their voices, and craft shorter speeches that fit the cylinders. This required Edison’s team both to socialize politicians to the new media tool and to mediate their personalities to accommodate the technology.⁸⁰

Universally acknowledged as the more dynamic speaker of the two nominees, Bryan perhaps faced the greater challenge. Photographs depict an animated communicator, often with arms outstretched or raised above his head emphatically driving home a key point. But projecting oratory to a full house while striding around a stage, as was the Nebraskan’s style,

76. National Phonograph advertisement, *Wisconsin Agriculturalist* 32, no. 42 (October 15, 1908): 13 (emphasis in original).

77. *Ibid.*

78. “Mr. Bryan’s Reception in India,” *The Commoner*, May 4, 1906, 6.

79. Haire, “Canning Speeches,” 4.

80. Wijffes, “Spellbinding and Crooning,” 159–160.

was incompatible with phonograph recording. A typical “spellbinder” who used his voice, expressions, and gestures to reach large audiences, Bryan would need to be reined in and his tone moderated for it to be contained on wax without creating “blast” or other distortions.⁸¹ Harold Voorhis, the National Phonograph Recording technician who worked with Bryan, indicated that the Democrat “seemed a little nervous when he first started, much more so he said than he ever felt in facing an audience of ten thousand people.”⁸² Bryan had rehearsed before Voorhis’s arrival, however, and “was quickly at his ease” after reshaping a few of his planned talks.⁸³ The resulting cylinders depict a restrained Bryan, one who deprives listeners of his powerful orations in exchange for flat addresses delivered in a bland midwestern accent. In harnessing the power of Bryan for mass consumption, Edison stripped him of his most potent weapons, leaving voters with an incomplete (if not inaccurate) representation of his personality. Moreover, dynamic speakers like Bryan who controlled and manipulated live audiences by reading the crowd and modifying their language and mannerisms to achieve a desired outcome could not influence how their recorded messages would be received by listeners. According to one account, “A phonograph reproducing a speech by Bryan,” played at a fellow Democrat’s Minnesota rally, “caused wild cheering,” with the audience erupting in wild enthusiasm for their party’s nominee. Meanwhile, members of a North Carolina “Bryan Club” listened intently as “The Great Commoner told of Imperialism and of the tariff, and the clear cut sentences held the audience in absolute silence to the end.”⁸⁴ Voters expecting to hear the forceful Bryan thunder from the phonograph horn may have sat in confused silence or in reserved respect when they heard the canned version of their candidate. In either case, there was nothing Bryan could do either to clarify his position or to acknowledge their reverence.

Taft likewise struggled early in his recording sessions. Before the arrival of Edison’s team, he had marked up old speech transcripts he once had pasted into a scrapbook thinking that he could simply read them in that form, but soon found “that he had difficulty following it.” As Edison’s representatives recalled, “These were the first records [Taft] had ever made and he remarked that it was a little different from what he had expected.”⁸⁵ Curious about the process, his wife Helen Taft sat in on the rehearsals and found herself laughing at his efforts to adjust his voice and speeches for recording. “Several experimental talks were made and reproduced with varying degrees of satisfaction,” the newspapers reported, perhaps indicating the difficulty the Republican had experienced in shifting from public speaking to recording.⁸⁶ Unlike Bryan, however, Taft never was known for his dynamism or his speechmaking skills—a disadvantage that, some suspected, kept him from stumping until late in the White House race and only after he learned he was falling behind the Democrat.⁸⁷ This perhaps resulted in Taft’s records more accurately reflecting his personality than did Bryan’s. There was little the Edison team likely needed to constrain about Taft’s speechmaking style to suit the

81. *Ibid.*, 150–154.

82. “Making the Bryan Records,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 7 (July 1908): 16.

83. “Making the Bryan Records,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 7 (July 1908): 16.

84. “Johnson Will be Named,” *East Oregonian*, August 19, 1908, 1; “Solicitor Spainhour at the Bryan Club,” *French Broad Hustler*, October 22, 1908, 1.

85. “Making the Taft Records,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 9 (September 1908): 4.

86. “Speaks into Machine,” *Daily Press*, August 4, 1908, 1.

87. “Bryan Tour Longer,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 1908, 1.

phonograph's technological limitations. One journalist even suggested that wax cylinders might enable the Republican to export one of his greatest qualities, "A great, deep voiced laugh—the Taft laugh," which the writer proposed, "ought to be put on a phonograph record and sent to all those sad places on this earth where folks never smile."⁸⁸

When both Bryan and Taft consented to employing the phonograph as a presidential campaign tool, each opened himself up to the prospect of having his image and personality shaped and mediated by Edison and his team. Yet what the phonograph had begun to reveal was that some personalities and voices were better suited for the new mass media technology than were others. On the one hand, strong voices were well suited for phonograph recording—but they also required fine-tuning to accommodate the technical requirements of soft wax recording cylinders. In that sense, the reining in of Bryan, necessitated by the technology, may have also reduced his impact on voters who found the measured talk emanating from their phonograph horns discordant with his public image. On the other hand, flat countenances provided the kind of consistent and reproducible results that Edison's engineers desired, which placed greater emphasis on the message than on the style in which it was being delivered. Consequently, politicians like Taft, who in the spirit of eighteenth-century republican expectations had never cultivated much of a public persona, were particularly well suited to the medium. His bland yet consistent recordings likely did not confuse voters, who had few expectations about his speech-making abilities, even if the cylinders did not sell as well as Bryan's reportedly had sold. Indeed, the most telling aspect of the impact canned speeches made on American voters might be the lack of any clear correlation between cylinder sales and actual votes. While Edison boasted of selling hundreds of thousands of Bryan's recordings, far outpacing sales of Taft's records, Taft nevertheless won the 1908 election by a comfortable margin. In the nascent marketplace of presidential candidates, it seems that large numbers of voters may not have been swayed by what they heard on their phonographs.

Making Presidential Candidates Accessible: Legacies of the 1908 Phonograph Campaigns

William Jennings Bryan, William Howard Taft, and Thomas Edison likely were underwhelmed with the results of their initial forays into the business of "canning" political speeches for the phonograph. For Bryan, whose oratorical and rhetorical abilities in public settings were beyond question, Edison's new method of mass producing sound for home consumption proved to be a poor fit for his speaking style—and more importantly, it failed to yield the electoral victory in 1908 that had already eluded him for so long. For Taft, there was little objective reason to believe that his two-minute voice recordings for Edison—put together with such nervous energy and care—had made any appreciable difference in his ultimate win over one of the most famous public orators of his time. As for Edison and his pitchmen, meanwhile, there is good reason to suspect that, despite their public proclamations to the contrary, they must have been discouraged by what the experience of the 1908 campaign

88. Love, "The Rise in Life of Taft," 3.

suggested about the long-term market prospects for canned presidential speeches. Indeed, when Edison company executives in 1912 again pitched the idea of recording and marketing up to eight new snippets of sound from presidential contenders Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and James Beauchamp “Champ” Clark, Edison flatly rebuffed the effort, concerned that “the results would be the same as with the Taft and Bryan records—that is, we might get fairly large orders for them from the trade but later on would have to take them back because the public would not buy them.” Conscious of the bottom line, Edison instead authorized only the Roosevelt records, if the Bull Moose Party candidate would consent, “as they would no doubt be constant sellers because of his popularity and prominence regardless of politics.”⁸⁹ Despite Edison’s claims to have sold more than half a million of Bryan’s recordings, the reality was that National Phonograph had shipped large quantities to its retailers and wholesale jobbers, who then—it seems—struggled to convince consumers to buy them for home use.⁹⁰

Looking beyond the specific impact in 1908, though, it is clear that the introduction of the phonograph as a mass communication tool in early twentieth-century presidential campaigning marked a profound turning point in American politics in a number of different respects. For one, the ready availability of the technology in American homes—and thus the practical ability of candidates to market themselves directly to voters on a mass scale—essentially marked the death knell of the traditional notion, already in decline, that overt appeals by a candidate for popular support, as a general matter, were undignified, dishonorable, and unworthy of respect. By recording their own voices on cylinders and endorsing Edison’s marketing and sales to consumers, the candidates of both major parties in 1908 effectively became their own campaign surrogates—thereby disrupting the long-standing American belief, tracing back at least to Washington’s return to Mount Vernon, that the nation’s leaders should not seek high office out of personal ambition but rather only reluctantly and patriotically in response to the public’s demand for their service and leadership. By the early 1900s, that is, the American public was clearly ready to move on from the traditional view that candidates should be viewed from a distance—and in that context, the phonograph’s emergence on the American home consumer market at roughly the same time was exquisitely well timed as a means of moving American political marketing into the more personality-driven, candidate-centric era that still persists at its core to the present day.

The mass marketing of candidates via the phonograph likely accelerated the development of broadscale changes in American politics in other, less immediately obvious ways as well. For instance, the phonograph and its ready-made direct connection between candidates and voters inevitably weakened—decades before the more commonly noted fireside chats of FDR or the TV-mediated “Camelot” of the Kennedy years—the long-standing institutional linkages of candidates to the formal political party structures that had long served to suppress the rise of “outsiders” in American presidential politics. The phonograph’s technology-based assignment of relative advantage or disadvantage to candidates blessed with certain media-friendly traits—say, an appealing laugh or a clear-sounding voice—similarly presaged the rise of

89. Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Thomas A. Edison, Incorporated, April 17, 1912, Thomas A. Edison Papers Digital Edition, reel 253, 243–44.

90. Korzi, “William Howard Taft,” 241.

visuals-based political communications and the decline of long-form policy exegesis as tools of political strategy.⁹¹ As suggested earlier, the sound-bite nature of the two-minute cylinder recordings by Bryan and Taft—driven in the early 1900s not by candidate choice but by the limits of the technology—opened the door to the oft-decried decline in the length and substantive depth of political leaders’ quotations disseminated in broadcast media and newspaper reporting alike.⁹² On a more encouraging front, the phonograph’s practical role in allowing the public to hear candidates directly and in their own words—rather than in secondhand accounts curated by newspaper publishers and editors—marked an important but under-recognized step forward in the democratization of access to information (and the concomitant risk of manipulation and distortion that came along with it) that one finds on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok today.

On the commercial front, meanwhile, Edison’s reticence to record a large number of candidate speeches in 1912 based on 1908 sales likewise illustrates the growing influence of commercial media indicators in shaping presidential campaigns. While Edison and other record company executives may have not understood how best to market politics and presidential nominees to the American people, their efforts nonetheless marked a dramatic shift away from older notions of stately and detached presidential candidates who passively rose to the office. In the years following the 1908 election, the use of commercial media—including radio, television, and more recently social media platforms—increasingly became recognizable and expected surrogates in the campaign process. Ultimately, though, the insightful Vermonter who in 1908 rightly predicted that canned speeches “may not convince or convert many voters” unknowingly had articulated the challenges inherent in swaying ballots through aggressive media campaigning. As Bryan discovered following the last of his three unsuccessful White House bids, sales were—and continue to be—an unreliable measure of voter interest and intention.

Shortly after Edison’s recording technicians left Taft’s Virginia vacation residence in 1908, journalists reflected that with the addition of several published images of the rotund Republican, “almost everybody now can see him and hear him.”⁹³ Simple as it may seem, this candid observation portended the impact and the legacy of phonograph cylinders in the widespread dissemination of presidential candidates to the voting public. Every American now had access to the next president and could make a personal connection to him through recorded speeches, moving images, and published photographs. Thus what long had been an almost-hidden campaigning process, largely accessible only to those with close personal relations or geographic proximity to the nominees themselves, was transformed into a broader democratic, marketable, and consumable spectacle, where every voter could “know” the candidates and their personalities. Projected from phonograph horns in homes across the nation, Bryan’s and Taft’s canned speeches amplified American democracy in ways that front-porch campaigns, political rallies, and whistle-stop tours could not, transforming presidential campaigning in the process. At the same time, men like Thomas Edison would continue to seek new and

91. Farkas and Bene, “Images, Politicians, and Social Media.”

92. Foley, “Sound Bites”; Ryfe and Kimmelmeier, “Quoting Practices.”

93. “Making the Taft Records,” *Edison Phonograph Monthly* 6, no. 9 (September 1908): 4; “Bryan’s Lead in Phonograph Talk Followed by Taft,” *Stark County Democrat* (Ohio), August 6, 1908, 3.

innovative ways to line their pockets by “selling” political candidates and shaping their public personas to meet the needs and demands of a consumer-driven voting public. The intertwining of phonograph, candidate, and corporation that started with the 1908 election marked the turning point for what became a winning campaign strategy in American popular politics, making clear that the stump no longer was for losers.

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