

# An Interview with Darrell West

In this election season many facts and figures have been circulating. The media has been relentless in relaying up-to-date information about the selection process, the two major parties and the antics of their candidates. In an attempt to understand the trends of this year's campaign, *Brown Daily Herald* Opinions Editor Richard Birchall asked professor of political science Darrell West to share some of his insights with the Brown community.

**Herald:** *What do you think is special, if anything, about this campaign season?*

**West:** Well I think 1988 is interesting because it's the first election of the post-Reagan era. So there's a lot of interest, a lot of uncertainty and a lot of suspense. There's been an unprecedented level of media coverage already and people are interested in what's going to happen.

**Herald:** *One of the most notable aspects of this campaign has been the role of the media. Have candidates always been subjected to the media analysis that they are now undergoing?*

**West:** The media has become very important over the last two years mainly because the process has changed. It used to be that party bosses controlled the selection of delegates. Now the process has been opened up. There are a large number of primaries and candidates have to appeal directly to the voters. The media has become important in a public setting like that. The changing process has given the media a larger role and the media has become actively engaged in this new process.

**Herald:** *But are those people the best qualified to run the country? Are today's top politicians just as capable as say, Jefferson or Madison were?*

**West:** They're just as capable or just as incapable. In their day Jefferson and Hamilton were controversial in their own right. We tend to think of them as huge characters, but in their time they were just as popular or unpopular as candidates are now.

**Herald:** *What do you think the consequences of the Reagan era will be for the next president. Will the next term see a weak presidency or at least one that will maintain a lower-profile?*

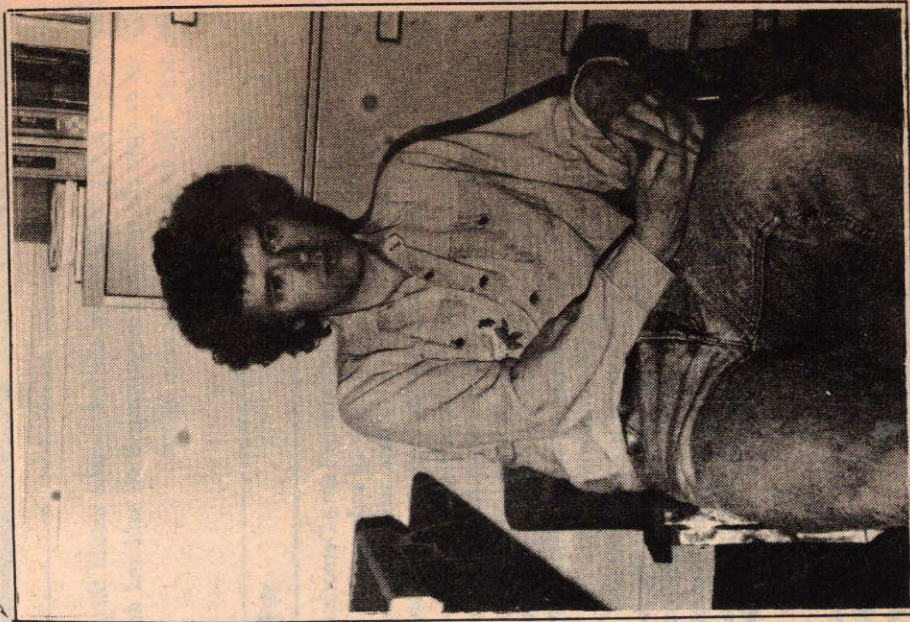
**West:** I don't think the next president is going to be weak president, but I think he will face enormous policy problems. The biggest problem he will face is the unprecedented budget deficit. That individual will have to make unpopular decisions, whether that is raising taxes or cutting spending, or some combination of the two. Those things are not popular but the next president will be forced to do those things or else face an economic catastrophe.

**Herald:** *Are there any aspects of the post-Nixon era that might allow us to predict the mood of post-Reagan presidential politics?*

**West:** It's somewhat different. Reagan came out of his crisis better than Nixon. Whereas Reagan lost a lot of popularity, Nixon lost his job.

**Herald:** *What does this country need in its next president? Are people looking for the right things or has there been too much emphasis on character as opposed to their ability to actually run the country?*

**West:** I think the character issue has been grossly overstated in this campaign. We've become too pre-occupied with the lifestyle and backgrounds of the candidates. We're ignoring the important issues — how we're going to deal with foreign policy and what we're going to do about the budget deficit.



KATHERINE BRYSON / Contributing Photographer



Herald: What was the reason for changing the election process?

West: Dissatisfaction with the old system led to the reforms. In conjunction with the mood of the late sixties it was the feeling that the people needed to increase participation in politics and open up the process.

Herald: You have said that the "media have become one of the major power brokers in contemporary politics." What are the political ramifications of this development?

West: I think the media tend to accentuate the volatility of the process. The media often cover things on a day-to-day basis. Each day something new is happening so you get a lot of ups and downs. The media also tends to focus disproportionately on the horse race and the personalities of the candidates.

Herald: Do the specific politics of the media, whether right or left wing, affect the way the candidates are presented to the public?

West: I don't see that press bias is a big problem. The field of journalism has become a very professional one and the people involved in the coverage don't want to be seen as explicitly biased in an ideological direction.

Herald: You have alluded to the fact that some candidates have shied away from the presidential race not wishing, for personal reasons, to get involved. Could you point to anyone in particular?

West: Mario Cuomo for one. There a couple of other people who could have got involved and didn't, such as Bill Bradley and Sam Nunn. But it's not just that they didn't enter the race because they didn't want their personal lives exposed—they each have their own reasons for not wanting to get involved.

Herald: That seems to raise the question of whether or not America's best and brightest are running the government. Are they sitting instead in the boardrooms of America's top corporations and law firms, unwilling to enter politics?

West: It's hard to say. I think Americans are always dissatisfied with the candidates that are running and they always want better candidates or at least different candidates. The candidates we have now are the ones the country has to work with and one of them is going to be president. I don't think the next president will be somebody who's not already in the field.

About the motives for entering politics I'm not sure today is any different from the past in that respect. People go into politics not because they want to make money, although some do make a lot of money, they go into politics because they like being in the public eye and they have a sense of public service.

Herald: Which party is expected to gain a majority in Congress and how will that affect the next president?

West: I would expect that the Democrats will maintain control of both the House and the Senate. If the next president is a Democrat then that individual will be in good shape. Having Congress controlled by the same party has traditionally made it easier for the President to pass things through. If the next president is Republican then that individual will have a tough time.

Herald: What are the chances of a brokered convention for either of the parties?

West: A brokered convention is a possibility but I don't see it as a likelihood. The only way it will come about is if three candidates emerge from a party without securing a majority. Even though it will be close I expect that someone will emerge from each party before the conventions.

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Herald: You don't see Cuomo or anyone else coming out of the woodwork late in the race?

West: Cuomo would like for there to be a brokered convention, but in the current world of campaign politics such a scenario would be highly unusual.

Herald: What are the chances of Ted Kennedy storming the Democratic convention in a flurry of publicity?

West: Zero.

Herald: The system for picking delegates is very complex. Would you say that the average American understands the system when he is voting?

West: No.

Herald: Isn't that a problem?

West: It's a bigger problem for the candidates than it is for the voters. Most voters go to their local polling place and their choice is not that complicated. Candidates, on the other hand, have a real problem because the rules are different in every state. It's complicated to keep track of all the rules.

in private, at any time. A caucus is a two-hour affair held in the evening where the vote is taken by a show of hands. The counting and distribution of the votes is the complicated part and the process differs from region to region.

Herald: Is voter turnout expected to increase or decrease during this election?

West: Some have suggested that voting should be on the increase since we have exciting races in both parties and also considering the extensive media coverage that the elections have been given.

Herald: Jesse Jackson has gained ground since the last election. How do you think the majority of Americans would feel about having a black president?

West: I think the majority of Americans are still uncertain about how they feel on that issue but Jackson is expected to come out of Super Tuesday with as many or more delegates than any other Democratic candidate so his candidacy should be taken seriously as he will be a force to be reckoned with.

Herald: How long do you think it will be before America sees its first black president or its first female president?

West: In the current process anything is possible. Anyone who can convince voters that he or she is worthy can become the nominee. Members from many groups face barriers but with way the process has developed many people have a better chance now than they would have had thirty years ago. We should see a black or female president within our lifetime.

Herald: Is there anyone that you would personally like to see become the next president.

West: I'm still making up my mind.

Herald: Well if you had to decide today who would run the country for the next four years...

West: I wouldn't.

Darrell West is an assistant professor of political science and director of the Public Opinion Laboratory of Brown's A. Alfred Taubman center for Public Policy and American Institutions. His article "Media Coverage in the Election Campaign" recently appeared in the Brown Alumni Monthly. His other published works include a study of presidential campaigns entitled Making Campaigns Count and a study on Congress and Economic Policy Making.