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## The Bradley Effect Was about Guns, Not Racism

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Nelson Rising, chairman of Tom Bradley's 1982 campaign for California governor, still remembers the phone call. Bradley called him shortly after 4 a.m. on a long election night, when it was clear Bradley had lost to Republican attorney general George Deukmejian.

"You were right," Bradley told Rising a bit wearily.

With those words, Bradley, the Democratic mayor of Los Angeles, acknowledged that a political mistake had cost him the governorship. And, despite all the theories that the election produced a "Bradley effect"—a supposed

secret racist vote undetected by polling—the mayor himself knew that his loss had different causes.

The main cause was guns. Against Rising's advice, Bradley had endorsed Proposition 15, a statewide ballot initiative that would have put a freeze on purchases of new handguns. Bradley and Proposition 15 both had a lead in the polls when Bradley decided to back the initiative. But there was a huge backlash against Proposition 15 in conservative California precincts. The resulting turnout was so overwhelming that it took down Bradley—just as Rising had predicted in a campaign meeting months earlier.

"I will never forget that meeting," Rising recalled. "I said, 'I don't own a gun. I don't intend to own a gun. If I could design a world without guns, I would. But Tom, if you support this, you can't win.'"

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## Mathews: The Bradley Effect Was about Guns, Not Racism

The mayor's other political aides were less worried at the time. Prop. 15 had a lead in the polls in the early fall, and so did the mayor. "The view was that it was a win-win," Rising recalled. What's more, Bradley, a former L.A. cop, believed strongly in gun control. But Prop. 15 had become a rallying point for Deukmejian, and helped bring out unexpectedly high turnouts in inland California, where shooting and hunting were very much a way of life. This surge in turnout changed the shape of the electorate. Surveys at the time showed that 35 percent of California's registered voters had a gun in the house. Among those who cast ballots in November 1982, nearly half were gun owners, according to exit surveys.

"Without Tom Bradley endorsing Prop. 15," said Steve Merksamer, who served as campaign chair for Deukmejian and as the governor's chief of staff, "we would have lost."

When the 1982 contest is recalled today, it is often assumed that pre-election polls showing a Bradley victory were wrong because of race. But there is no clear evidence of that. Last fall, when some commentators were suggesting a "Bradley effect" could explain presidential candidate Barack Obama's lead in the polls, I examined surveys and news stories from the 1982 race, and talked with more than a dozen major players in both the Bradley and Deukmejian campaigns. Only two expressed any belief in the idea that the 1982 California governor's race saw a "Bradley effect." And even those two campaign workers, former

Bradley aides Phil Depoian and Bill Elkins, maintain that without Prop. 15, Bradley almost certainly would have won anyway.

"Today, when I hear very intelligent people talking about the Bradley effect as if it actually happened, I just scratch my head," said Rising. "If there is such an effect, it shouldn't be named for Bradley, or associated with him in any way."

According to those who were there, the real lessons of the Bradley campaign involve the dangers posed by divisive issues and by a candidate's own allies. Bradley's campaign suffered three self-inflicted wounds it could not overcome.

The first, of course, was guns. Proposition 15, which put a cap on gun ownership, had been qualified for the ballot by men who were Bradley's friends; chief among them was John Phillips. Prop. 15 proposed to limit the number of pistols in private hands in the state to the number legally owned as of April 30, 1983. Only law enforcement personnel could buy new guns.

Some Bradley aides said they tried to convince Phillips to wait and qualify the measure for a later election, so as not to hurt the mayor's campaign. Phillips, later an attorney in Washington, didn't remember any such appeals.

What Phillips remembered was having all eyes on him at the election night party at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A. "Everybody blamed me for the defeat of

the first black governor of California—I know Bradley felt that himself,” said Phillips. Some people in the campaign still do.

“Now, I always smile when I read about the Bradley effect,” said Phillips, jovially. “Thank God I’ve been vindicated 25 years later. It’s not my fault.”

The second wound: absentee ballots. The 1982 election in California was the first under new laws that made it easier to vote absentee. Voters no longer needed a specific reason—such as illness or a trip out of state—to request an absentee ballot. Democrats had lobbied for the changes, but Bradley’s campaign did little to take advantage. Republicans, led largely by people involved in that year’s U.S. Senate campaign of then-San Diego Mayor Pete Wilson, skillfully exploited the new rules by sending absentee ballot request forms to more than two million registered Republicans. The forms included an envelope with postage already paid.

“I think it was significant,” said Wilson, who served eight years in the Senate and two terms as California governor. “We figured, ‘We’ll get a higher percentage of our registered voters to vote than the Democrats will get of their registered voters.’”

The Republican strategy worked. Bradley won 19,000 more votes than Deukmejian among those who cast ballots in precincts. But Deukmejian won the absentees by more than 100,000.

In a 1983 report on the election, pollster Mervin Field, who had predicted a Bradley victory based on exit polling, said this surge in absentee voting was the “primary cause” of the poor election night prognostication. Polling models had been based on an absentee vote similar to the 304,000 votes cast in the previous gubernatorial election in 1978. But in November 1982, more than 506,000 votes for governor came from absentees.

Finally, the third wound: low African-American turnout. This was a three-part problem, involving black voters, regional rivalries and, some suggest, football.

Bradley, wary of being seen as “the black candidate,” didn’t campaign in the black community and didn’t do enough to turn out black voters, some aides recalled. “The position we took was, ‘My God, this is a historical event and black folks are going to turn out as never before,’” said Bill Elkins, one of Bradley’s closest aides. “And instead, the turnout did not reach the level we thought it would.”

In their turnout models, pollsters had expected that minority voters—black, Latino and Asian—would make up 20 percent of the electorate. Postelection estimates put the figure at just 15 percent. Black turnout—in fact, Democratic turnout, in general—was lower than expected in the Bay Area. Campaign veterans on both sides of the race believe northern Californians didn’t trust Bradley, in large part because he was mayor of their unpopular regional rival.

Deukmejian told me in an interview last fall: “Tom Bradley was popular in southern California, but people throughout the rest of the state were not all that comfortable having someone who was mayor of Los Angeles as their governor.”

To make matters worse, Los Angeles, under Bradley, had lured away the popular Oakland Raiders football team that same fall. “It was about football,” said Bill Norris, a longtime Bradley supporter who was a federal appellate judge at the time. “The turnout in black precincts in Oakland was below expectations, and I believe that’s because of hard feelings that L.A. had stolen the team.”

Deukmejian’s campaign avoided the subject of race, except at one crucial moment a month before the election. Bill Roberts, a campaign consultant, told a group of reporters that public opinion polls might not be picking up racial bias in the vote. Deukmejian dismissed Roberts from the campaign, but Roberts’s comments, as much as anything, are responsible for the idea of a “Bradley effect.”

Some Bradley supporters thought Roberts’s comments, while repudiated by Deukmejian, had an impact on the race. But pollsters and political pros said there’s no clear evidence of that. Bradley, in fact, did well with white voters in urban and suburban areas, where gun ownership is lower. The Los Angeles mayor won relatively conservative San Diego County, quite a feat for a Democrat.

In his postelection report, Field—while allowing that the gun issue, absentee votes and lower-than-expected minority turnout explained polling errors—clung to the idea that Bradley may have lost the election because of his race. Field based this view on a series of statistical extrapolations from the same exit polls that led to his faulty predictions on election night.

More than three percent of Deukmejian voters indicated in exit polls that their vote was based on a desire not to vote for the black candidate. Field, extrapolating, estimated that the three percent amounted to 136,000 racist votes for Deukmejian. Exit surveys also found that 0.6 percent, or about 23,000 Bradley voters under Field’s extrapolations, had voted against Deukmejian because of the attorney general’s Armenian background. And finally, Field found that Bradley out-performed a typical Democratic statewide candidate by about three percent points among black voters. On that basis, Field estimated that Bradley gained 16,500 votes because of his race.

Throwing those figures together, Field said Deukmejian had a net advantage of 96,000 votes from prejudice. Deukmejian won by 93,000.

Field’s view left hard feelings. Some former Deukmejian aides still blame Field for creating a lasting impression that there was something wrong with the election.

Officials of both campaigns said their polls showed a tightening race. The Deukmejian tracking poll results,

which his former chief of staff Merksamer keeps framed in his Sacramento law office, show a rapidly narrowing race. Bradley was up 12 on Oct. 7, up four on Oct. 14, and up just one point in the final tracking poll, two days before the election.

“We thought it was going to be close,” said Rising of the Bradley campaign.

Setting aside the strange math, it’s worth noting that the exit polls weren’t wrong just in Bradley’s race. In the U.S. Senate contest, public polls and exit polls also predicted a narrow victory for the Democratic candidate, the departing Gov. Jerry Brown. Wilson beat Brown by six points.

Wilson recalled that the mood was dark at his election night headquarters at first, as the polling suggested he had lost, before the actual returns brightened spirits. Around midnight, Wilson talked by phone with Deukmejian, who said he’d lost.

In an interview last fall, Deukmejian said election night was hard. “I was very, very dejected. And I was praying.” Not wanting to hang out at the election night party and wait for what might be bad news, he went home to Long Beach and stayed up all night, listening to returns on a news radio station. He learned he had won shortly before dawn.

Asked why he won, Deukmejian said he thought he was the stronger candidate, but mentioned the absentee vote program, too. He paused. “I think it was the gun control initiative,” he said.

Bradley, who died in 1998, didn’t dwell on the defeat. He ran again in 1986, but was beaten badly by Deukmejian, then a popular incumbent. Depoian, who managed the 1982 campaign for the mayor, said, “Ten years later, if you were to ask Bradley what happened, he’d say, ‘I don’t know. Maybe it was gun control.’ He didn’t talk about it. He was a very forward-looking guy.”