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CHAPTER 6

The Trash-Talking Candidate Who Wasn't Supposed to Win

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The candidate was disliked by the leadership of his party when he entered the race. Over his lifetime, he had held disparate and inconsistent views on issues of the day, so what he would do if he got into office was unclear. Establishment figures and the major newspapers were appalled with the prospects that he might win, but were convinced that he wouldn't once all the facts about him were unmasked. As a personality, the candidate was very self-confident and derided the opposition. He made aggressive charges against his opponent during the campaign and even threatened lawsuits against the opposition. He apologized for nothing. A biography noted:

*"He goes straight for a jugular vein. He says outrageous things about his opponents and their allies, generally depicting them as losers, radicals, bunglers, trouble makers, or even outright dangers to the country."*¹

No, we are not referring to the 2016 presidential election, nor to Donald Trump. Instead, the reference is to the year 1961 and to the Los Angeles City mayoral election of that year. The candidate was Sam Yorty, a registered Democrat at the time who had nonetheless had supported Republican Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election against Democrat John F. Kennedy. Kennedy, in Yorty's view "was just kind of a pretty boy" whose wealthy father had bought him the nomination.² In Yorty's view, supporting Nixon just proved he was an independent thinker who put little weight on party loyalty.

Yorty won the 1961 Los Angeles mayoral election, unseating incumbent mayor Norris Poulson. It wasn't supposed to happen. Poulson had the support of the downtown LA establishment – and especially of the *Los Angeles Times* - which, at the time, tended to dominate municipal politics. But Yorty took advantage of the latest electronic medium of that era – television and free time on TV that he could obtain by being newsworthy and making charges. Poulson assumed traditional newspapers would carry the day for his re-election. And by constantly making serious charges against Poulson, Yorty forced his way into the news, even into the pages of the reluctant *LA Times*. He couldn't be ignored.

Of course, any comparisons can be pushed too far. Trump was an outsider in the sense that he was a businessman and reality TV figure who had never run for political office. In contrast, Yorty – although he was not in elected office at the time of the 1961 mayoral race – had been a local politician for many years. He had served in the state assembly and in Congress. And he had often run for office and failed. Indeed, the biography of Yorty from which the italicized quote above came is subtitled, "Politics of a Constant Candidate."³ Yorty – in contrast to Donald Trump – was knowledgeable about the workings of government and was familiar with the local political figures and institutions of the day when he ran for mayor in 1961.

In fact, there are two biographies of Yorty. One, to which we referred above, is a more scholarly treatment co-written in 1973 by a UCLA professor of political science, when Yorty was still in office (in his third term as mayor).⁴ It's reasonable to assume that part of the motivation behind the book was that Yorty might achieve higher office. By that time, Yorty had unsuccessfully run for the U.S. Senate, the

¹John C. Bollens and Grant B. Geyer, *Yorty: Politics of a Constant Candidate* (Palisades Publishers: 1973), p. 213.

²Samuel Yorty, "Ask the Mayor Oral History Transcript," UCLA Oral History Program, 1987, p. 100. Referenced as "Yorty Oral History" in later footnotes.

³Bollens and Geyer.

⁴John C. Bollens was a long-time faculty member with expertise in local politics. The Bollens-Ries-Hoffenberg lecture series at UCLA continues to carry his name. <http://www.brh.ucla.edu/>.

governorship, and even for president. If he had won in 1961 when he wasn't supposed to win, perhaps he might do it again.

The other biography is something of a puff piece, written in 1966 by Ed Ainsworth, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. Ainsworth among other topics, had been assigned by the *Times* in the 1940s to be the point man in the newspaper's successful campaign to establish a countywide air pollution control authority.⁵ It may seem strange that an *LA Times* reporter would write an admiring biography of a man who his newspaper had bitterly opposed in 1961. But by the 1965 mayoral election in which Yorty won a second term, the *Times* had come around and endorsed him. So it's not surprising that a *Times* reporter would write a flattering biography at that point.

Yorty, as a mayor in his first term, had made peace with the *Times*. He did so partly by supporting the efforts of Dorothy Chandler – of the Chandler family that owned the paper – to develop the downtown Music Center. And with the 1966 gubernatorial election looming, Yorty – if he ran against incumbent Democrat Pat Brown – might make good use of a flattering biography. Unlike Donald Trump, Yorty had no permanent grudge against the news media in the abstract. Why not win them over if you could?

So who was Sam Yorty? How did he win the race for mayor in 1961? What lessons might be drawn from that long-ago contest? We'll address that issue at the end of this chapter.

What's Remembered of Sam Yorty?

Mayors of the City of Los Angeles are generally not well remembered. Although there is often speculation that a sitting LA mayor will achieve some higher office, so far none has succeeded becoming a statewide or national figure. Back in 1961, Los Angeles was, if anything, seen as a backwater by the elites of the country (and certainly of the Bay Area). LA was notable mainly for Hollywood (much of which is not within the City boundaries) and the freeways that were operating or being built – but not for high culture. Ordinary folk, however, were more impressed and new people were constantly arriving to the City.

The City's chief newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, was not viewed as a major national paper until the late 1960s. Instead, the *Times* was seen as a vehicle for local business boosterism and for the promotion of Republican candidates. LA's smog did get national attention – but that was not a plus for the City. As for educational institutions, UCLA was up and coming, but still emerging from being the southern branch of the University of California (Berkeley). USC was noted for football. And Caltech, which was prominent in science and engineering, was not in LA, but in Pasadena.

So viewed from the east, Los Angeles was at best a work in progress. It had a population of about 2.5 million at the time of the 1961 election, the nation's third largest city. New York had 7.8 million; Chicago had 3.6 million. But Los Angeles was rapidly growing along with the southern California region and the state. And many of the new arrivals to the City were settling in the San Fernando Valley, a one-time rural area until after World War II, and not in the downtown area. Despite the best efforts of the downtown elite, the City was decentralizing, aided by the developing freeway system.

⁵Ed Ainsworth, *Maverick Mayor: A Biography of Sam Yorty, Mayor of Los Angeles* (Doubleday & Co.: 1965); Daniel J.B. Mitchell, "Clearing the Air: What the Times Called for in 1947" in Daniel J.B. Mitchell, ed., *California Policy Options 2016* (UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, 2016), pp. 5-24.

To the extent that Yorty has any name recognition today, it is as the guy who was defeated by city councilman Tom Bradley – LA's first and only black mayor – in 1973, after the incumbent Yorty ran a particularly nasty, and many would say – racist – campaign against Bradley.⁶ In fact, the 1973 contest was a repeat of Bradley versus Yorty in 1969, which Bradley lost.

Yorty in both campaigns essentially linked Bradley – a former policeman – to black radicals at a time when the Watts Riot of 1965 was still a fresh memory of the city electorate.⁷ Bradley, once elected as mayor, went on to serve for four terms (20 years) and died in 1998. The international terminal at Los Angeles airport is named in his honor.

Yorty in contrast, who also died in 1998, has no such monument. Bradley, when he died, lay in the LA Convention Center for public viewing before burial, a project constructed during Yorty's mayoralty and pushed by the mayor, but not named after him.⁸ Similarly, visitors to the Los Angeles Zoo likely don't know it was a creation of the Yorty years. And, of course, the buildings of the above-mentioned LA Music Center are named after fundraiser Dorothy Chandler and after big donors.

So Who Was Sam Yorty?

Like many Los Angeles residents, Samuel William Yorty was from somewhere else, in his case, Lincoln, Nebraska, where he was born in 1909. Nebraska was a source of populist politics. Yorty's father was an admirer of William Jennings Bryan whose free silver movement captured the Democratic Party in 1896. Bryan was a three-time Democratic nominee for president: 1896, 1900, and 1908. And he was Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson. Inspired by Bryan and Wilson, Yorty decided early on that politics would be his goal in life as a career.

What emerges from Yorty's biographical portrait is an ambitious fellow who could easily make friends and who was very self-confident. When he came to LA, he held various private-sector jobs, ultimately became a lawyer, and early on got into politics, his goal. In Los Angeles during the 1930s, he became involved in Technocracy, a movement of that period that saw putting scientists and engineers in charge of the economy as a way of escaping the Great Depression.

Technocracy's fascination with technology in a sense is akin to today's beliefs that "technology" will solve human problems. In a sense, it can be seen as a continuation of late 19th and early 20th century belief in applying "science" to human endeavors such as managing firms ("scientific management"), setting tariffs (the "scientific" tariff), and more generally to fields such as urban planning and criminology. But in the 1930s, Technocracy also resonated with New Deal ideas about "economic planning" and the idea that remains prominent in California "progressivism" that experts, and not potentially corrupt politicians and political parties, should be in charge.

⁶TV coverage from the 1973 campaign can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Val48Xn8UrY>.

⁷TV coverage from the 1969 campaign can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnDjQ1QbWho>.

⁸Yorty's name lives on mainly in a blog on local Los Angeles politics named after him that dates back to 2004: Mayor Sam's Sister City: <http://mayorsam.blogspot.com/>. The Mayor Sam blog, likely without permission or blessing from Yorty's heirs, posts local political gossip. See Steve Hymon, "'Mayor Sam City Hall Blog Unmasked,'" *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2005. Available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/02/local/me-mayorsam2>. The blog has continued – and now tends to tilt conservative – despite the death of its creator, Michael Higby, in 2015. See Brenda Gazzar, "Political blogger Michael 'Mayor Sam' Higby remembered for his influence, wit," *Los Angeles Daily News*, April 19, 2015. Available at <http://www.dailynews.com/obituaries/20150419/political-blogger-michael-mayor-sam-higby-remembered-for-his-influence-wit>.

On the other hand, Yorty seemed to be selective in what remedies for the Depression he would follow. He did not support the leftist EPIC (End Poverty in California) 1934 gubernatorial campaign of author Upton Sinclair. Sinclair touted "production for use" rather than "production for profit" and wanted to redevelop the state's economy through cooperatives financed by a vague monetary mechanism. Yorty apparently sympathized with establishment Democrats who resented Sinclair's capture of their party's nomination. They ended up supporting the incumbent Republican gubernatorial candidate or staying home.⁹

In any case, in 1936, the year that Franklin D. Roosevelt was running for re-election as President, Yorty ran for the state assembly from a district in LA as a Democrat. FDR's popularity helped down-ticket Democrats, including Yorty, who won the seat although the district had been Republican before. His campaign was basically a shoe-string, door-to-door operation. One thing that Yorty had been advised was that given limited resources, the doors to be knocked on should be those of homeowners rather than apartment dwellers. The latter were seen as unlikely to bother to vote. The idea of focusing on yeoman homeowners and their concerns played an important part in Yorty's appeal in his later mayoral campaigns.

In the state assembly, Yorty started out on the left – and would in later campaigns sometime be tarred as "communist" due to his affiliations from that time. But in fact he was ideologically fluid and ended up teaming with another assemblyman – Jack Tenney – whose legislative committee focused on investigating and rooting out alleged communists in state government.¹⁰ Later, however, he and Tenney had a falling out. In any case, Yorty's left-right political career (which included unsuccessful runs for a seat on the LA City Council and for the U.S. Senate), went on hiatus when he lost the race, or withdrew from the race, for his seat in 1942. He entered the Army Air Forces during World War II.¹¹

During the war, Yorty served in various administrative roles in Hawaii, Australia, New Guinea, and the Philippines. After discharge from the service, he ran for mayor of LA in 1945, and lost. But he won a new seat in the state assembly in 1949, and then won a Congressional seat in 1950, serving two terms. In Congress, he made a name for himself pushing for the right of California to control access to its offshore oil deposits and for protections for California's allotment of Colorado River water. These statewide and regional issues kept Yorty's name in the news. But a 1954 run for the U.S. Senate was unsuccessful as was another in 1956. Yorty tended to be out of sync with the liberal/left side of the Democratic Party during this era and beyond.

In short, by the time of the 1961 mayoral contest, Yorty was certainly a known local political personality, but a bit of a has-been. Because he had been out of office when his second term in Congress ended, he was not front-and-center in the news. Establishment Democrats were not enthused about him,

⁹Yorty was interviewed in the 1980s for a documentary on the Great Depression and the EPIC campaign. Outtakes from that interview can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbrX6mI2Io>.

¹⁰Tenney later moved to the state senate, switched to the Republican Party, and became increasingly anti-Semitic in later years, writing a series of anti-Semitic tracts. He was peripherally involved in the loyalty oath controversy at the University of California. Yorty in an interview in the 1980s said he thought Tenney "really went crazy" and claimed no contact with him in Tenney's later years. "Oral History," p. 80.

¹¹Bollens and Geyer (p. 237) report that Yorty won the primary but lost the seat in the general election. Yorty's version in the later Oral History (p. 64) is that he withdrew to join the military. Both could be true, since his name would have remained on the general election ballot even if he withdrew. What later became the separate Air Force was part of the Army during World War II.

particularly with his backing of Nixon over Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election. Yorty had developed a private law practice by that time, although he was searching for a way back into the political world. The 1961 mayoral election was to be Yorty's path back into the headlines and into elected office.

The Office of Mayor in LA

The power of the mayor of Los Angeles at the time of the 1961 election was limited compared to what was typically found in other big cities, especially in the east and Midwest. This power vacuum is filled in large part by the members of the city council and the fact that key City functions are controlled by other elected officials such as the city attorney.

These limits on the mayor are a reflection of California progressivism. Races for mayor and city council are nonpartisan. Candidates essentially run on their own; there is no well-oiled party "machine" to determine nominees. Members of both parties, and independents, all run for office in one primary. If no one receives 50%-plus-1, the top two run against each other in the general election.¹² Absent a strong local political party, however, even if the winner and a majority of the city council are of the same party, each elected official is an independent operator. The council feels little or no obligation to the mayor.

In addition, many municipal functions are not handled by the City. Schools are run by a school district that extends beyond LA's borders. Many health and welfare functions are handled by the County. And exactly what powers the mayor does have are conditioned by the weight of history. A corruption and police scandal in 1938, which even involved a car bombing, led to the recall of then-Mayor Frank Shaw. He was replaced by a reform candidate, Fletcher Bowron, a former judge. But the upshot of these events was a situation in which the mayor had little direct control of the Police Department.¹³

Absent party machinery, a downtown LA elite – especially whoever in the Chandler family was running their *Los Angeles Times* at the time – had considerable influence in who got to be mayor. The *Times* was not especially enthusiastic about the reformist Bowron, who was too liberal for its tastes, particularly with regard to his support for a public housing project in Chavez Ravine. In significant part due to the opposition of the *Times*, Bowron lost a bid for re-election in 1953, and was replaced by Norris Poulson, a Republican more to the *Times'* conservative bent.

Poulson, like Yorty, had been in both the state assembly and Congress. His most memorable achievement as mayor was bringing the Dodgers from Brooklyn to LA, although a much of the credit for that importation was due to the efforts of Rosalind (Roz) Wyman, the first woman on the city council. Poulson was a relatively staid fellow who, in keeping with the preferences of the *Times*, focused on infrastructure such as the airport and taking care of business. As he neared the end of his second term in 1961 at age 65, he leaned towards retiring. But he was finally persuaded by the powers-that-be, undoubtedly to his after-the-fact regret, to run for re-election to a third term.

¹²A similar nonpartisan "top-2" primary system now characterizes all state elections (legislature, statewide officials) thanks to a 2010 voter-approved proposition (Prop 14).

¹³One result of the recall of Shaw was an attempt by new Mayor Bowron to remove Shaw-linked city councilmen in the 1939 elections. Yorty ran for a council seat but lost.

Trash

Although Poulson was a reluctant candidate, Sam Yorty was anything but reluctant. In a later oral history, he attributed his decision to run to persuasion by a black attorney acquaintance he just happened to run into.¹⁴ That story is implausible. We know he had a life goal of politics. Surely, he was aware of the upcoming 1961 election and had been thinking about it. But the black attorney story – which also appears in his two biographies, was helpful to his image.

The first biography was written after the Watts Riot and could be seen as showing he had black support. The second biography was written after his 1969 campaign in which he beat Tom Bradley in a racially-charged campaign. And the oral history interview with Yorty took place in the 1980s when he was largely remembered for his losing campaign against Bradley.

Still, even if we assume Yorty was not a reluctant candidate, it can be hard to beat an incumbent when things seem to be OK in municipal affairs. Most voters – then as now – pay little attention to local politics, and – in fact – they often don't vote at all in municipal contests. So if he was going to run, Yorty was going to need a newsworthy overall theme. That theme became condemnation of the downtown LA elite who ran things for their own benefit and ignored the concerns of ordinary folks, particularly those in the rapidly-growing San Fernando Valley.

The question was whether there was enough dissatisfaction with Poulson and City Hall among voters to make a Yorty candidacy worthwhile. Yorty commissioned a poll and found that although Poulson had more support than he did, voters didn't give majority support to any of the names then being thrown around as potential mayoral candidates.¹⁵ Apparently, there was enough voter dissatisfaction with the current regime at least to make a run for mayor a plausible endeavor.

But amorphous dissatisfaction is not enough. Voters would have to hear that a Mayor Yorty would – in the words of a much more recent candidate – “drain the swamp.” And they would have to be persuaded that even though they might not be enthusiastic about City Hall, it was a swamp.

The *LA Times* was willing to give Yorty publicity when he favored Nixon over Kennedy.¹⁶ But the *Times* was not going to promote his message in a positive sense in the upcoming mayoral campaign. Incumbent Mayor Poulson was fine with the *Times*. Moreover, for the Yorty theme to gain traction, there had to be concrete illustrations of how an out-of-touch, elitist, and even corrupt City Hall was ignoring the interests of voters. One illustration that Yorty hit on was trash.

The City was in charge of collecting trash and for disposing of it. For years, homeowners burned their trash in backyard incinerators. However, as concerns about smog mounted, the practice was banned countywide in 1954. That ban was controversial. Some homeowners regarded the right to burn your own trash as akin to the right to bear arms as seen by gun enthusiasts. As a result, municipal rubbish collection was more of an issue than you might expect. In any event, more trash to be picked up had costs. And to defray some of the cost, the City had a recycling program.

¹⁴ Oral History, p. 94.

¹⁵ Bollens and Geyer, p. 117; Ainsworth, p. 129.

¹⁶ “Yorty Supports Nixon and Details Reasons,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1960, p. 4.

Nowadays, we tend to think of recycling as an environmental issue. But in 1961, apart from smog concerns, environmentalism was in its infancy. The LA recycling program was in place because tin cans could be sold as scrap and thus were revenue to the City. To make trash collection easier (for it!), the City ran a three-day program. Garbage (discarded food waste, etc.) was collected one day. Combustible rubbish – the type that was once burned in backyards – was picked up another day. And cans were collected on a third. As Yorty depicted the situation, convenience and cash for City Hall was leading to drudgery and dirty work for the trash-separating housewife. If elected, he would end this sorry state of affairs with one-day pick up and no messy separation.

The Primary Campaign

As noted, Yorty did take a poll before deciding to enter the race. But local election polling is difficult in part because voters don't usually pay much attention to local affairs and often don't have strong opinions. Low turnout is another characteristic of local elections, and it's hard to know who will turn out and in what numbers. So judgments in local politics are often based on gut feelings.

The Downtown View

Now put yourself in the place of those downtown elitists at the *LA Times* and elsewhere. They likely wouldn't see anything wrong with their control of local affairs; it was rather the natural order of things. And they certainly wouldn't be impressed with trash as an issue. Their servants likely dealt with the trash.

In addition, Yorty had been out of office for several years. Poulson was the incumbent mayor and from the downtown elite's perspective, he was doing a good job. Moreover, when he ran for his second term four years before, he was elected in the primary. No general election was even required. Everybody they knew said Poulson was a shoo-in. So what could possibly go wrong? And who could be against good Mayor Poulson? Finally, the *Times* was prepared to play its role in the Poulson campaign, and all the right people read the paper.

Challengers

The first step in the 1961 election process was filing to run during January 9-28 for the nonpartisan primary to be held April 4. Although a host of non-serious candidates eventually filed, apart from Poulson and Yorty, the only other significant entrant was a Republican city councilman named Patrick McGee from the San Fernando Valley area.

McGee was noted for attempting to retain a seat in the state assembly while serving on the city council, but he was eventually forced to give up the former. Despite that odd history, McGee was likely viewed by the *Times* as the more serious challenger because he was still in office on the city council and had been attacking the mayor on smog, traffic, and other issues in advance of the filing date. As for Yorty, the *Times* noted that he had run previously for mayor in 1945 and had come in only in sixth place. The *Times* also noted that Bart Lytton, a prominent savings and loan executive and "a strong influence in Democratic Party affairs," had filed his name as a protest against the lack of any "important, active Democrat" in the contest.¹⁷ Assuming Lytton knew when he filed that Yorty, still a registered Democrat

¹⁷Carlton Williams, "14 Entered in L.A. Race for Mayor," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1961, p. 1.

despite his support of Nixon over Kennedy, was running, his protest could be seen as aimed at Yorty, the party apostate.

Attack and Response

Although establishment Democrats were not keen on Yorty, he was the only significant registered Democrat in the campaign for mayor of Los Angeles (which he pronounced Law SANG-lus). And Yorty came out swinging:

"There is in Los Angeles today a public mandate for vigorous new programs to meet the needs of a growing city. Poulson's pathetic pretense has brought stagnation, has stunted our civic growth and weakened the financial structure of the city. He has brought Los Angeles to the brink of financial instability by a reactionary, do-nothing, administration."

"We have more taxes, more traffic congestion, more smog, more dope problems, more bus fares, more crime, more government costs, more wasteful expenditures and false promises and more stagnant local government than at any time in our history."

Poulson responded that he would take the high road – always a risky strategy in the face of an aggressive opponent – and not engage in "mudslinging or cheap political dogfights."¹⁸ Yorty challenged Poulson to debate and, when he wouldn't, charged him with hiding behind "a wall of secrecy" and a "high-powered propaganda machine...with his own stooges throwing innocuous, leading questions at him."¹⁹ Despite these attacks, the *Times* assured readers towards the end of January that "it is considered highly likely by many that one candidate in the mayoral race may get more votes than all of his opponents combined and thus be elected in the primary."²⁰ The *Times* did not explicitly say that the "one candidate" would be Poulson, but that outcome seemed to be implied.

Throat and Mud

Apart from not wanting to engage in "mudslinging" debates, Poulson had another reason for refraining, a bad case of laryngitis. The *Times* reported that "throat specialists" had counseled him to stop talking. Yorty, however, was taking no excuses and said he would form a "truth squad" that would follow the mayor around and "refute (his) one sided, canned propaganda."²¹

By this time, the mayor was beginning to take the Yorty challenge more seriously. The chair of Poulson's re-election committee announced that the mayor would have a "facts brigade" to counter his opponent's "truth squad."²² Part of the motivation for the "brigades" was to provide alternative speakers for the voice-challenged mayor. But there was to be no sympathy from Yorty:

¹⁸ Carlton Williams, "Yorty Files, Raps Record of Poulson," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1961, p. B1.

¹⁹ Carlton Williams, "Poulson and Arnebergh Attacked as City Campaign Gains Impetus," *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 1961, p. B1.

²⁰ Carlton Williams, "92 Qualify in City for Election Race," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1961, p. H2.

²¹ Carlton Williams, "One Poulson Rival Fails to Qualify," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1961, p. B1.

²² Carlton Williams, "'Facts Brigade' Countered by 'Truth Squad,'" *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1961, p. 20.

*"(Poulson) claims serious chronic laryngitis when asked to face the voters or other candidates in open meetings, but gives wide publicity to his alleged speeches at closed meetings where his record cannot be questioned."*²³

Later, as the primary approached, rumors were circulated that Poulson had throat cancer, or a stroke, or a heart attack. Who exactly had first started what today would be termed "fake news" reports about Poulson's health was thought to be McGee, but Yorty was happy to use them.²⁴

Promises

Yorty also made various promises. He would raise police salaries with the cost to be financed by cutting "frills" from other departments. He would form a citizens' committee to mediate labor disputes. Another new committee would help senior citizens. Taxes would be reformed. City government would be reorganized. Despite his prior disdain for now-President John Kennedy, Yorty would have open press conferences styled after Kennedy's. All of this innovation would be in contrast to the Poulson administration which "has hidden the true facts from the people."²⁵

Oil and Rubbish

By the time of these announcements, the campaign was a month old and Poulson's "facts brigade" seemed just to be getting organized.²⁶ Moreover, there was about a month to go before the primary and unanswered charges by Yorty were accumulating. By mid-March, Yorty was suggesting the oil leases in Los Angeles Harbor were potentially suspect, and asking the state attorney general to investigate.²⁷ And his issue of trash collection was inserted into the campaign. Poulson complained that Yorty's charges were "out of step with our American tradition of fair play."²⁸ Meanwhile, McGee, the third significant candidate in the race, was hardly mentioned in contemporary news accounts; his starting advantage of being a current city councilman was being eroded by Yorty's ability to command public attention.

The Cost of Disloyalty

As the primary election approached, the Democratic establishment began to strike back at Yorty with endorsements of Poulson. Assemblyman Jesse Unruh, who would soon become speaker of the state assembly, supported Poulson. Paul Ziffren, an influential player in Democratic politics, was another Poulson supporter. Yorty, however, depicted these opponents as part of a machine that was taking over the Democratic Party.²⁹ But Democratic state senator Richard Richards denounced Yorty shortly before the primary:

"Democrats should not be misled nor deceived by party labels in the mayoralty election. For example, Sam Yorty claims to be a Democrat. However, Democrats should remember

²³ Carlton Williams, "Double Charter Reform Urged by Candidate," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1961, p. B1.

²⁴ Carlton Williams, "Poulson Accuses Foes of Stirring Up Rumors," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1961, p. 3.

²⁵ Carlton Williams, "Additional Police Pay Raise Favored by Yorty," *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1961, p. C12.

²⁶ Carlton Williams, "Attorney Callister to Head 'Facts Brigade' — Speakers for Poulson," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1961, p. E1.

²⁷ Carlton Williams, "Yorty Wants State to Investigate Oil Leases," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1961, p. B6.

²⁸ Carlton Williams, "Tempo of Mayor Race Steps Up; Poulson, Yorty in Hot Exchange," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1961, p. 22.

²⁹ "Richards Barb Draws Fire from Yorty," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1961, p. 3; Carlton Williams, "Nonpartisan Support for Poulson Increases," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1961, p. B1.

*that he has a disloyal record within the party. He has attacked our Democratic leaders and our Democratic organizations. He is not a responsible Democrat and should be disregarded and avoided by members of the Democratic Party.*³⁰

The Result

How would the voters digest what had occurred in the primary campaign? Would they go with the incumbent mayor who seemed to be supported by the establishments of both political parties? Or would Yorty's continual charges against the *status quo* candidate attract them?

Would they be attracted to a candidate who seemed to enjoy irritating the powers-that-be? The *LA Times* made no secret of its choice, printing a sample ballot on its front page with its desired candidates for the various offices and ballot issues marked with an X. Voters were advised that they could clip the front page sample ballot and take it into the voting booth for reference.

The primary attracted some national attention. The *New York Times*, on the eve of the election – and presumably relying on what the LA establishment thought they knew – reported that Poulson was favored and that his chief opponent was McGee. Yorty was mentioned as a third candidate in the race who had criticized oil leases. But the oil lease issue didn't catch on, according to the paper with the implication that Yorty would be knocked out of the race.³¹

It didn't quite work out that way. In the final tally, Poulson received 39.8%, Yorty came in second with 27.3%. McGee finished with 25.5% and the rest of the vote went to minor candidates.³² Turnout was about 41% of registered voters. As a result, there would be a general election on May 31 and the race would be between Poulson and Yorty. McGee said after the election that he should have campaigned harder, but he initially declined to endorse either of the finalists.³³

The General Election

The primary result shook up both the local establishment and Poulson himself. Sticking to the high road in the face of Yorty's allegations had not produced the desired result. So Poulson charged that if Yorty were elected, he would be dominated by an "underworld machine" and would appoint a new police commission that would "open the town up" to corruption and vice.³⁴ In short, Poulson would from that point on be an aggressive candidate. The problem was that when it came to what Poulson called mudslinging, he was not especially good at it. Apparently, even for slinging mud, there is a skill that some have, and others don't.

Why a Protest?

For the *LA Times*, the primary election was a shock. In an editorial a couple of days later, the *Times* just couldn't understand the results. The paper acknowledged that the fact that Poulson didn't receive a majority (which would have ended the contest without need for a general election) could have been due to a protest vote. But, the editorial lamented, "Protest against what. Poulson is a superior mayor."

³⁰Carlton Williams, "Poulson Accuses Foes of Stirring Up Rumors," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1961, p. 3.

³¹"Poulson Favored in Coast Election," *New York Times*, April 2, 1961, p. 43.

³²Bollens and Geyer, p. 120.

³³"Going Fishing, Says McGee of Election Loss," *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1961, p. 32.

³⁴Carlton Williams, "Fiery Battle Shapes Up for Mayor," *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1961, p. 1.

The *Times* suggested that Poulson needed to be a harder campaigner. Poulson, it said, should "vigorously (make) the obvious more obvious." (The obvious, of course, was that he was the one and only worthy candidate in the race.) The *Times* singled out the San Fernando Valley as an area particularly in need of being informed of that self-evident fact. "The chief business now is to get Mayor Poulson re-elected. 'Now' is the right adverb."³⁵

Unfortunately for Poulson and the *Times*, "now" was not an option. Two days later, the paper reported that Poulson was resting in Palm Springs with his laryngitis and was under doctor's orders not to talk for 48 hours.³⁶ Poulson's harder campaigning would have to be delayed. Others would have to be proxies for the incumbent mayor.

Lawsuit, Trash, and Smear

Yorty, however, was under no restriction when it came to talking or campaigning. He filed a \$2.2 million lawsuit against Poulson charging the mayor with slander due to his "underworld" allegations. Poulson declined Yorty's invitation to attend the press conference – held at City Hall – at which the slander suit was announced. He instead sent word from his Palm Springs recuperation site calling the lawsuit and press conference a "cheap political matinee."³⁷ The location of the press conference, arguably right where the mayor should have been rather than in Palm Springs, itself pointed to Poulson's absence from the City. It tended to raise the larger health issue regarding the mayor.

Beyond the lawsuit, the trash issue – which had already been raised – was brought back to public attention by Yorty. The City had hired a consulting firm that recommended a fee payable by property owners for trash collection. Yorty charged that the mayor had known in advance of the recommendation and thus had deceived homeowners in not disclosing the potential fee earlier. Moreover, he charged that downtown commercial interests would be exempt from the fee and characterized the consulting report as "phony."

Yorty also charged that he was a victim of a "big lie" and "big smear" campaign by Poulson whose campaign, he said, had been saying that he (Yorty) had communist sympathies. He charged that he was the victim of "news blackouts" by the Poulson campaign and "machine," likely a complaint that the *Los Angeles Times* was not giving him adequate coverage. The mayor was also charged with offering a salary increase to the police without specifying a tax to pay for it. (Recall that Yorty had also proposed a police raise to be paid for by cutting "frills" from elsewhere).³⁸

Health and Recuperation

Meanwhile, as Yorty made his charges, the peace and quiet Poulson had sought in Palm Springs ended up lasting two weeks. Poulson declared on returning to LA that he was not going to conduct a "namby-pamby" campaign. However, his return to work initially included time in Sacramento and Washington, DC, while Yorty stayed in LA making news.³⁹ Poulson indicated he would not personally campaign until

³⁵ Editorial: "Post-mortem and a New Fight," *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1961, p. B4.

³⁶ "Mayor Takes Rest Before Campaign," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1961, p. B3.

³⁷ "Yorty Files \$2 Million Action Against Poulson," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1961, p. B1.

³⁸ Carlton Williams, "Yorty Calls \$85,000 Trash Survey 'Phony,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1961, p. 26.

³⁹ "Poulson Set to Begin Ballot Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1961, p. B3.

May 10, twenty-one days before the general election, a decision to abstain of which Yorty said he was "unimpressed."⁴⁰

The *Times*, which had limited its campaign coverage until Poulson was back on the job, picked up the pace of reporting with ostensibly neutral profiles of the two candidates. Its profile of Poulson aimed at addressing the age/health issue with the headline "Poulson, 65, Still Seeks Hard Work." It emphasized that low turnout in the primary may have contributed to Poulson's failure to obtain an absolute majority. Voters who were satisfied with the mayor's governance didn't bother to turn out, presumably assuming he would win without them.⁴¹ The profile for Yorty, in contrast, pointed to election contests he had previously lost, the fact that he had been disloyal to Democrats by endorsing Nixon in 1960, and that as an assemblyman, Yorty had once favored a bill that would have legalized gambling. "His platform contains the promise of every political 'out,' more services for less money," declared the Yorty profile.⁴²

Police and Parker

While Poulson was in Sacramento meeting with Democratic governor Pat Brown, Yorty characterized the governor as anti-police. He speculated that Poulson was making a secret deal with Brown that would hurt the Police Department. Yorty cited a campaign contribution made in 1953 to the Poulson campaign at that time by a man now in state prison. He claimed that Poulson was part of a plan to fire Police Chief William Parker back in 1953, but hadn't done so when the plot was exposed.

Poulson, when asked, said these charges were "hooey."⁴³ Police Chief Parker and the police commissioner denied there was any such plot. But, retorted Yorty, how would the police chief know what Poulson intended to do back in 1953? Why is the chief, who should be non-political, speaking for Poulson? And didn't Parker know about the campaign contribution?⁴⁴ In short, Yorty kept making charges that Poulson – who was trying to be above the fray after his dabbling with the "underworld" charge against Yorty – had to deny defensively.

Calamity and Filth

The state of the campaign, by this point, had the *Times* in a panic. In an editorial entitled "Either Poulson or Calamity" of April 27, it promoted Poulson to the rank of "a very superior mayor," up a notch from "a superior mayor" in the editorial it ran just after the primary. Yorty, in contrast, was a "political adventurer" who made "a fantastic charge" against Poulson on the police issue, and was improperly using the trash collection issue to get elected. Yorty was saying things that are "self-evidently false." But he nonetheless appealed to misguided people "who enjoy doubting a woman's virtue or hearing that the Civil War was fixed." Compared with the "municipal wreckage" a Yorty victory would bring, Yorty "has made Mayor Poulson indispensable."⁴⁵

Of course, it would be hard to be seen as indispensable if the rumors of Poulson's ill health persisted. As noted, the rumors had originated with McGee during the primary race, although Yorty picked them up

⁴⁰Howard Kennedy, "Samuel W. Yorty Seeks New Career," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1961, p. B1

⁴¹Howard Kennedy, "Poulson, 65, Still Seeks Hard Work," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1961, p. E1. Author Kennedy of the two profiles was normally the newspaper's labor editor.

⁴²Howard Kennedy, "Samuel W. Yorty Seeks New Career," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1961, p. B1

⁴³Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Implies Poulson in Deal Against Police," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1961, p. 18.

⁴⁴Carlton Williams, "Poulson Hurls Lie at Yorty Police Charges," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1961, p. B2.

⁴⁵Editorial: "Either Poulson or Calamity," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1961, p. B4.

for his campaign and, at one point, sent a telegram to Poulson suggesting he withdraw for health reasons.⁴⁶ In an effort to disprove the health rumors, Poulson checked himself into Good Samaritan Hospital to be certified as fit by a team of doctors. Meanwhile, Yorty continued to charge that Poulson's "machine" was smearing him with communist insinuations:

*"The professional purveyors of filth running Poulson's campaign are the low types who discourage our citizens from taking part in politics. They drag democracy down to the gutter while they carry on their campaign of lies and deceit. Their tactics are subversive of real democracy and an insult to the intelligent voters of Los Angeles. This will be proved when the filth purveyors go down to smashing defeat on May 31."*⁴⁷

The *Times* ran a photo of Poulson smiling as a nurse in Good Samaritan Hospital checked his blood pressure. Not surprisingly, doctors there gave him a clean bill of health. But they admitted that they had worsened his laryngitis problem by putting instruments down his throat to see what was wrong.⁴⁸

Downtown Power

Meanwhile, Poulson complained about "a lack of concern for truth" by Yorty. The mayor said he had planned to debate Yorty, but had reconsidered that decision due to Yorty's "outright, undisguised, unsubstantiated lies."⁴⁹ Yes, said Poulson, he was backed – as Yorty said – by "powerful" downtown supporters, but "they are powerful because they are part of a dedicated civic-minded citizenry."⁵⁰

The *Times* editorialized again that a Poulson victory was "a civic necessity":

"Suppose Mr. Yorty were elected mayor (save the day!), what would he do to liquidate 'self-interest'? Here are some guesses:

He might, after what has passed between them, try to get rid of Chief of Police Parker, who has built one of the ablest police forces in the United States.

He might try to sack Administrative Officer Sam Leask, the city government's durable and unswerving fiscal conscience.

He would sabotage and attempt to destroy the city's rubbish and disposal program...

*As things stand, a third term for Mayor Poulson is a civic necessity. One term for Candidate Yorty would be too many."*⁵¹

But what the *Times* saw as virtuous civic servants who would be threatened by a Yorty regime, Yorty saw as folks who had a "conflict of interest" and who contributed to "campaign slush funds." Indeed, Yorty might get rid of them. "Once entrenched," said Yorty, "these leeches can be swept from power only by a

⁴⁶Carlton Williams, "Humorous Note Enters Mayor Race," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1961, p. A12.

⁴⁷Carlton Williams, "Poulson to Undergo Health Check to Silence 'Whispering Campaign,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1961 p. E1.

⁴⁸"Five Doctors Find Poulson's Health Good," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1961, p. B1.

⁴⁹"Poulson Accuses Yorty of 'Undisguised Lies,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1961, p. A9.

⁵⁰Carlton Williams, "Mayor Lists Backers, Asks Yorty to Do Same," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1961, p. B1.

⁵¹Editorial: Candidate Yorty's Civic Reform," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1961, p. B4.

change in administration.”⁵² Those in authority were indeed nervous about what a Yorty victory might mean for them. The president of the Police Commission, Duncan Shaw, denounced a Yorty proposal to add 5,000 new cops as fiscally impossible. And he associated Yorty with “Las Vegas gambling interests.”⁵³ Yorty denied ever supporting adding 5,000 new police and said the number came from a report by the Police Commission itself.⁵⁴

More Trash

And the trash issue was now hot. Just the mention of it seemed to tar a candidate, so the *Times* – after an investigation – revealed that Yorty had once invested in a private dump that had made a pitch to the County to enlarge its land area. The plan never came to fruition, but a County employee resigned (and then took another County job) after he was accused of helping Yorty and other investors. The story was complicated and ambiguous. But the idea was that if Poulson had a rubbish problem, so did Yorty.⁵⁵ Poulson challenged Yorty “to tell the truth about your connection with the rubbish business.”⁵⁶ A related *Times* editorial referred to Yorty as a “dump peddler.”⁵⁷

Yorty struck back with an allegation that a city contract with a private dump operator and local politician had been a “give-away” to the operator/politician. Yorty said he (Yorty) had a client of his law practice who had offered the City a better deal but it was rejected.⁵⁸ Poulson charged that Yorty’s dump had various health and other legal violations such as rats.⁵⁹ And an unnamed source at the Board of Public Works was said by the *Times* to have “refuted” Yorty’s charge of a bad dump deal for the City.⁶⁰

TV and Gambling

Of course, Yorty was not relying on the *LA Times* for good publicity. He castigated newspaper coverage as constituting “a sorry day for journalism in Los Angeles.”⁶¹ He was making use of television, the latest electronic medium which had become ubiquitous by 1961, certainly among households likely to produce voters. In the same edition of the *Times* in which the dump peddler editorial was published, there appeared an ad for a weekly evening “Report to the Citizens” by candidate Yorty on KTTV, Channel 11.

Apart from paid time, Channel 11 featured an evening news program with George Putnam, a conservative commentator who seemed to support Yorty. Putnam gave Yorty substantial free airtime during the campaign and Yorty gave Putnam newsworthy charges to air. Ironically, the station was

⁵²“Yorty Blasts Poulson Aides,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1961, p. B2.

⁵³“Police Board Head Calls Yorty Plan ‘Claptrap,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1961, p. B17.

⁵⁴“Yorty Denies Urging 5,000 More Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1961, p. B6.

⁵⁵Carlton Williams, “Yorty’s Past Rubbish Dump Interests Shown,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1961, p. B1.

⁵⁶Carlton Williams “Yorty Given Challenge by Poulson,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1961, p. B1.

⁵⁷Editorial: “The Rubbish in Mr. Yorty’s Closet,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1961, p. B4.

⁵⁸Howard Kennedy, “Give-Away in Rubbish Deal Claimed,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1961, p. B1.

⁵⁹“Poulson Charges Dump Violations,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1961, p. B1.

⁶⁰“Works Board Rejects Yorty Rubbish Charges,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1961, p. B2.

⁶¹Howard Kennedy, “Yorty Hits Newspapers for Supporting Poulson,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1961, p. A8.

owned by the *Los Angeles Times*.⁶² Presumably, the *Times*' owners could have shut down Putnam. But perhaps they underestimated the power of television to move voters relative to newspapers.

Then there was the gambling matter which had already begun to surface with the "underworld" charge by Poulson (and the resulting lawsuit by Yorty) and the references to Yorty's connections to Las Vegas. In another *Times* investigation, it was revealed that Yorty, in 1955, had assisted legal clients in trying (unsuccessfully) to obtain a gambling license for a Las Vegas casino.⁶³ The investigation was coordinated with an editorial arguing that Yorty had "a tolerance for gambling."⁶⁴ As in the case of Yorty's dump investment, however, nothing nefarious was demonstrated. But the two investigations – dump and gambling – served to suggest that something was not quite right about Yorty, even if it was not quite clear what exactly was wrong.

Cows, Bulls, and Seniors

Yorty's campaign could also conduct investigations that, while not showing anything illegal, generated public perceptions of shady activity. It turned out that Poulson had invested in a cattle ranch in Oregon – the amount of the investment a matter of dispute. (Poulson was born in Oregon and had family property there.) Poulson claimed that the investment represented his life savings, a "nest egg" for his wife and himself. But Yorty rejected Poulson's protestations as "shocking and feeble." He asserted that news of the mayor's holdings had "shocked the citizenry."

In response, Poulson said he would sell all his cattle to Yorty for \$25,000 to show they weren't as valuable as Yorty had claimed.⁶⁵ Yorty had shown pictures of a bull on TV which Poulson claimed was far more valuable than any bull he actually owned.⁶⁶ Indirectly, however, talk of nest eggs and retirement savings pointed to the age/health issue for Poulson. And Yorty declined the offer to invest in Poulson's Oregon property saying he would confine his investments to LA, a slam on directing funds out of the local area. In addition, with Poulson focused on his Oregon holdings, Yorty made the case that Poulson was neglecting important issues in the City. Smog from cars, for example, could be addressed by newly-developed devices that could be put on automobiles. But that solution was being neglected by Poulson while the mayor had his mind on his cattle ranch and the voters suffered from bad air.⁶⁷

With regards to age, yet another issue arose. Los Angeles was the home in the 1930s and 1940s of various "pensionite" movements, proposals to provide state or federal pension-type payments to senior citizens. As younger people flocked to southern California after World War II, these movements waned in political significance, but there were still veterans of the various pensionite groups within the voting population. Yorty proposed a senior citizens committee that would deal with such issues as access to public facilities and transit for the aged.⁶⁸ A Poulson spokesperson replied that the mayor was already

⁶² Bollens and Geyer, pp. 125-126. It appears, based on ads in the *Los Angeles Times*, that Yorty's paid program apparently became more frequent than weekly as the campaign continued. He also ran his program on another station.

⁶³ Carlton Williams, "Gambling License Fee for Yorty Verified," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1961, p. B1.

⁶⁴ Editorial: "Don't Gamble on Yorty!" *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1961, p. B4.

⁶⁵ Carlton Williams, "Poulson Deflates Yorty's 'Cattle Baron' Balloon," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1961, p. K1.

⁶⁶ Carlton Williams, "Mayor Answers Attack on Oregon Holdings," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1961, p. B1; Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Rejects Poulson Explanation of Ranch," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1961, p. B1.

⁶⁷ "Poulson, Yorty Mayoral Race Enters Last 10 Days," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1961, p. K1.

⁶⁸ "Program for Senior Citizens Urged by Yorty," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1961, p. B1.

taking care of the needs of senior citizens and that it was “completely irresponsible” to suggest otherwise.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, at the other end of the age spectrum, Yorty, movie actress Jane Mansfield, and others judged a beauty contest for the Studio City Chamber of Commerce.⁷⁰

Deposition Time

May 11 – originally the day after the date on which Poulson said he would personally begin his campaign – featured a dramatic event. As noted earlier, Yorty had sued Poulson for slander over his charge that Yorty was connected to the “underworld.” Poulson was required to provide a response in a deposition hearing that took place in public in City Hall. Poulson repeated his charge in a written statement which he submitted as part of the deposition process.

In what the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the front page as “scenes approaching pandemonium,” Poulson had insisted, on advice of his attorney, on reading his statement out loud. Yorty’s lawyer then said that he would file a libel lawsuit against Poulson to accompany the slander lawsuit. Yorty added that he would sue any newspaper that published Poulson’s remarks for libel.⁷¹ (The Times, however, summarized them, but wasn’t sued. They basically involved the unsuccessful Las Vegas license and the never-enacted bill legalizing bookmaking in the 1930s.) Yorty and his lawyer abruptly left the hearing, saying they would ask the court to appoint a commissioner to take over the deposition. And they petitioned the court to add three Poulson campaign officials to the slander suit.⁷²

When the case came back into court May 22, nine days before the election, the presiding judge castigated both sides for their conduct during the aborted deposition hearing. He rejected the argument by Poulson’s attorney that the lawsuit was just a political stunt that would disappear after the May 31 election and ordered the mayor to appear for another deposition. But he angrily declined to allow the “publicity” that would emerge from a demand by Yorty’s attorney for radio and television coverage.⁷³

As it turned out, when the new deposition hearing was about to be held two days before the general election, it was pointed out that since three new defendants had been added, they hadn’t had adequate time to prepare. The judge then delayed the deposition until July, i.e., after the election and after whoever won the election would be in office. Yorty charged that the delay was caused by Poulson’s desire “to run and hide.”⁷⁴

Double-Dealing Democrats and Liquor

Yorty did not have official Democratic Party support because of his efforts for Nixon over Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election. In fact, prominent Democrats had endorsed Poulson. So Yorty charged that although the mayoral election was supposed to be nonpartisan, “double-dealing” Democrats had colluded with local Republicans to create a *de facto* Republican machine. The machine, he said, had actually kept Democrats out of the mayor’s office for many years, despite a Democratic advantage in voter registration:

⁶⁹ Carlton Williams, “Poulson’s Program for Senior Citizens Lauded,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1961, p. B1.

⁷⁰ “Queen Contest Deadline Set,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1961, p. E6.

⁷¹ Carlton Williams, “Violent Clashes Mark Poulson, Yorty, Action,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1961, p. 1.

⁷² “Yorty Accuses Three More of Conspiracy,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1961, p. B1.

⁷³ “Judge Hits Both Sides in Poulson-Yorty Suit,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1961, p. B8.

⁷⁴ Carlton Williams, “Poulson and Yorty Meet, Exchange Verbal Blasts,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1961, p. 1.

"The real hypocrisy is now emerging. Republicans are to be ordered to vote for Poulson because he is a Republican. Democrats are told they must be nonpartisan and must not support me because I have a record of independence. In other words, true nonpartisanship, to which the Poulson press gives lip service, is to be twisted and turned to mean nonpartisanship only for the Democrats."⁷⁵

In short, the issue of lack of support from his own party was turned on its head. True Democrats should support Yorty because he was the target of corrupt Democrats who were in fact pushing Republicans. "Fair-minded" Republicans, in turn, should support Yorty because he was independent of the Democratic machine, and thus nonpartisan.

As this contest of who was really what was being played out, a Poulson supporter released what he said was a document showing that Yorty had the backing of the California Tavern Association.⁷⁶ Demon rum, it seemed, was secretly supporting Yorty. Indeed, a prominent group of black ministers endorsed Poulson citing Yorty's alleged proclivities toward gambling, alcohol, and other forms of vice.⁷⁷ Yorty came back with an endorsement of the Baptist Ministers Union.⁷⁸

Alcohol, of course, is sinful to some, and – in excess – not good for one's health. But the health issue continued to be raised by Yorty, not with regard to drinking, but with regard to Poulson. Poulson's campaign machine was endangering the mayor's health by pushing him to campaign, according to Yorty. Given the mayor's alleged fragile health, the machine was "endangering his very life by its callous and total indifference to his physical condition."⁷⁹

Broken Records, Valley Interests, and Commissioners

Given the ongoing charges from Yorty, it was hard for Poulson to pursue his planned strategy of a positive campaign and of being above what he had termed "mudslinging." But he depicted himself as doing his best to carry on his mayoral duties while discussing the issues of the day:

"I had hoped this campaign would be a clean one, but my opponent had different ideas. I have frequently answered the distorted, ridiculous accusations of my opponent. However, he persists in bringing up false charges again and again. As long as he keeps up this 'broken record' tactic, I'll not lower myself to satisfy him with an answer. I'll stick with the real issues. Mr. Yorty can play with his mud."⁸⁰

(For younger readers, "broken record" refers to the tendency of phonograph records, when scratched, sometimes to jump back a groove, thus repeating a sound over and over.)

Even in carrying out mayoral duties, however, Poulson was vulnerable to criticism. Poulson's 1961-62 budget proposal, for example, was, according to Yorty, fiscally irresponsible with deficit financing and

⁷⁵Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Blasts Democrats Non-Support," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1961, p. K1.

⁷⁶Carlton Williams, "Poulson Plans Press Conferences, TV Talks," *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1961, p. B1.

⁷⁷"Negro Minister Group Votes Poulson Support," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1961, p. 10.

⁷⁸Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Says Statements Expose Poulson 'Hoax,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1961, p. B1.

⁷⁹Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Charges Poulson Health is Sacrificed," *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1961, p. B1.

⁸⁰Carlton Williams, "Mayor Puts Campaign Issues First," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1961, p. B1.

depletion of city reserves. Property taxes were to be raised as part of the new budget, a move never popular with homeowners.⁸¹

Although it is not clear the degree to which formal polling was being undertaken, there was an awareness that Yorty's message of opposition to the powers-that-be in downtown LA and City Hall had special resonance in the San Fernando Valley (where many of those homeowners resided). Poulson tried to address Valley concerns by sympathizing with underrepresentation of the Valley on the city council and the need for more freeways there.⁸² Of course, changing election districts for the city council and developing new freeways were projects outside the authority of the mayor. The former is in the hands of the council itself. And the latter was in the hands of the state.

Poulson got a boost in the Valley when city councilman Patrick McGee, the primary opponent who came in third, and McGee's campaign chief, gave Poulson an endorsement. Republican McGee represented part of the Valley. Shortly before his announcement, McGee had met with former Vice President Richard Nixon, now back in California (and soon to run unsuccessfully for governor). McGee denied Nixon had offered him anything in return for the endorsement of Poulson. He refused to "recant" any of his criticisms of Poulson in the primary campaign, but he said that of the two candidates, Poulson was "the better man."⁸³ However, the Valley-area co-chair of McGee's earlier campaign endorsed Yorty and his "superior qualities for leadership."⁸⁴

The *Times*, of course, had no doubt who was the better man with superior leadership qualities. In an editorial, it speculated that if Yorty won, he wouldn't be able to find capable people to be commissioners or committee members for the various city services and functions. Either Yorty wouldn't be able to recruit quality persons willing to work for him, or he wouldn't even want folks of requisite quality. Voters were becoming aware, according to the *Times*, that selecting Yorty would be "very chancy" and would "overturn good government."⁸⁵

Yorty apparently was not worrying about filling commission appointments. He promised, if elected, to fire all of the sitting police commissioners. One, he said, was indirectly involved with a Gardena poker palace. And he had no faith in the others, given known vice operations that were operating in areas of the City. Members of the Police Commission then declared that if Yorty were elected, they would quit.⁸⁶ Yorty retorted that by injecting politics into the election campaign, the police commissioners had already disqualified themselves and shouldn't wait for the election; they should quit immediately.⁸⁷

In an editorial response five days before the election, the *Times* praised the police commissioners and other commissioners appointed by Poulson. Los Angeles, the newspaper said, was "the best governed of the great American cities." It referred back to the 1938 police-related scandal that led to the recall of then-mayor Frank Shaw as evidence of what a "venal" Commission could do. Citizens, the *Times*

⁸¹"Yorty Assails Poulson on City Budget," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1961, p. K1.

⁸²Carlton Williams, "Mayor Puts Campaign Issues First," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1961, p. B1.

⁸³Carlton Williams, "McGee Campaign Chief Comes out for Poulson," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1961, p. B1; Carlton Williams, "McGee for Poulson in Mayor Race," *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1961, p. 1.

⁸⁴Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Endorsed by Teamsters Council 42," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1961, p. B1.

⁸⁵Editorial: "Poulson's Commissioners," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1961, p. B4.

⁸⁶Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Promises to Fire Police Commissioners," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1961, p. B1; Carlton Williams, "Police Board to Quit if Yorty Wins," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1961, p. B1.

⁸⁷"Yorty Again Accuses Police Commissioners," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1961, p. B1.

believed, were finally waking up to the danger a Yorty victory would pose. If the stay-at-home voters who now know that the choice is "Poulson or disaster" will just turn out, Poulson will surely win.⁸⁸

Old Postage, the Innocent Bystander, and Car Prices

Yet another controversy in the election campaign involved Yorty's use of the "franking privilege" while a member of Congress. Congressional representatives have the right to free postage as a way of communicating with constituents by mail. But they are not supposed to use the privilege for political mailers. The charge – ostensibly on behalf of a group called the Property Taxpayers Council – was that then-Congressman Yorty had abused the franking privilege in his unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. Senate to the tune of almost \$250,000.⁸⁹

As with every issue that came up in the campaign, the charge soon led to a countercharge. Yorty denied that he had misused the franking privilege. And the source of the charge became a matter of controversy. The original charge had been made by Philip Watson, who was identified as an "official" of the Property Taxpayers Council. (Watson was later elected LA County Assessor.) But the president of the Council said that Watson was neither authorized to speak for the organization, nor was he an official of it. Yorty thus pointed to the "repudiation of Mr. Watson" in his response.⁹⁰

And then the rubbish dump returned in a new connection. The *Times* reported that Yorty had a partnership in his dump business with a fellow named Joseph Satin who had pleaded guilty in 1948 to an offense that involved a mining venture and some stolen pipe. He had pleaded guilty, was fined, and served a five-year term of probation.⁹¹

Yorty said in response that Satin was in fact a legal client, that he (Yorty) had no knowledge of his prior conviction, and that in any case Satin was "an innocent bystander in a political fight." Poor Mr. Satin had paid for his crime and "should be permitted to rear his five children in this community without being subjected to an unwarranted attack." Moreover, Yorty hoped that "the decent people of Los Angeles will feel as revolted as I do by this exhuming of the past conduct" of Mr. Satin. They would certainly be considering "the irreparable damage to innocent children who must go to school and face their classmates after seeing their father's alleged past wrong dug up long after he has atoned."⁹² Satin himself said that his past conviction, in fact, was not in 1948, as the *Times* reported, but ten years earlier in 1938.⁹³

Finally, there were charges of price fixing of automobile dealers, and particularly by Martin Pollard, a car dealer who was also Poulson's campaign manager. Yorty said that the U.S. marshal was hunting for Pollard to serve him a subpoena and call him before a grand jury looking into such price fixing.⁹⁴ Pollard responded that he wasn't evading a subpoena, but had been out of town lobbying in Sacramento. Many car dealers were being subpoenaed, he said, for a probe about which he had no knowledge.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Editorial: "We Cannot Take a Chance," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1961, p. B4.

⁸⁹ Carlton Williams, "Poulson Supporters Dig Into Yorty Race of '54," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1961, p. B1.

⁹⁰ "Mayoral Stand Denied by Taxpayers Council," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1961, p. B1.

⁹¹ "Yorty Link to Mining Deal Told," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1961, p. F1.

⁹² "Yorty Assails Attack on 'Innocent Bystander,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1961, p. F1.

⁹³ "Just Client of Yorty's, Satin Says," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1961, p. 17.

⁹⁴ Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Raps Poulson as Desperate," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1961, p. 6.

⁹⁵ "Poulson Aide Charges Yorty 'Distortion,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1961, p. 7.

And with that final controversy, the contest was in the hands of the voters. In its final Election Day editorial on the front page, the *Times* declared:

*"Today is the day when a favorable opinion of Poulson and the city government is no substitute for an X after Poulson's name. You have to go to the polls. Vote, we say, or be sorry."*⁹⁶

But it was the *Times* that turned out to be sorry, when Yorty received 51.5% of the vote. At his victory celebration after the polls close, Yorty told his supporters, "I don't blame you for shouting. We have been silenced for so long... We proved that democracy does work."⁹⁷

Reflecting on his defeat a year later, Poulson blamed his loss on the enemies he had made in bringing the Dodgers to LA.⁹⁸ If so, such enemies were part of a larger group that had grown tired of the downtown LA elite making decisions, whether about baseball or anything else. Two days later, the *Times* lamented the Yorty victory in an editorial entitled, "There's Nothing Left but Hope." It's them was that, while there was indeed a downtown elite, the voters will soon miss them now that they are gone:

*"The threat is real. The marching you hear is the retreat of what Mr. Yorty calls 'this vicious downtown clique that has long dominated City Hall,' and the marching beat is thumped out on the tubs of the television performers. We love our city and we weep for it. Beyond that we can do nothing but watch and report – and hope that the voters will turn out next time."*⁹⁹

Aftermath

In the month between the election and the start of Yorty's first term (July 1), the *Times* continued to cluck and lament. Various city officials resigned (rather than wait to be removed). Two members of the Airport Commission later refused to resign and were removed. Yorty initially said he needed to "school" Police Chief Parker, but didn't ask him to resign.¹⁰⁰ He did question whether police investigative files had been used in the election against him. The mayor-elect and the chief eventually had a friendly get-together and Parker stayed on. Yorty also retained two of the members of the Police Commission. A *Times* editorial declared cautiously that "the Police Department Seems Safe."¹⁰¹

Yorty appointed the black attorney who he claimed had induced him to run for mayor to the Police Commission, and promised also to appoint a Mexican-American. As analyses of the pattern of votes developed, it appeared that Yorty had made inroads with minority voters who – like the growing voting population in the San Fernando Valley – had reasons not to be enamored with the downtown elite.¹⁰²

⁹⁶Editorial: "Vote or Be Sorry," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1961, p. 1.

⁹⁷"Yorty Hails Election as People's Victory," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1961, p. 1.

⁹⁸Obituary: Alfred E. Clark, "Norris Poulson: Mayor Who Lured Dodgers to Los Angeles, Dies at 87," *New York Times*, September 26, 1982.

⁹⁹Editorial: "There's Nothing Left but Hope," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1961, p. B4.

¹⁰⁰Howard Kennedy, "Yorty Pledges Clean Sweep for City Hall," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1961, p. 1.

¹⁰¹Editorial: "The Police Department Seems Safe," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1961, p. B4.

¹⁰²Yorty's later opponent, Tom Bradley, attributes the support Yorty received from black voters in 1961 to the expectation he would fire Chief Parker and a general impression that Poulson was unresponsive to black concerns. Tom Bradley, "The Impossible Dream Oral History Transcript," UCLA Oral History Program, 1984, pp. 96, 99. Referenced as "Bradley Oral History" in later footnotes.

Shortly after taking office, in fact, Yorty favored appointment of a black city council representative to fill a vacant seat over the opposition of Valley interests that wanted to redistrict and move the seat to their area. It was only after the Watts Riot (in 1965 after Yorty was re-elected), and the two re-election campaigns against Tom Bradley (in 1969 and 1973) that Yorty took on the racist label for which he is remembered – if he is remembered at all – today.¹⁰³

Although establishment Democrats had favored Poulson, Yorty also had a friendly post-election get-together with Democratic Governor Pat Brown. He also met with Democratic Vice President Lyndon Johnson at a ceremony involving a new terminal at the airport. Yorty said he would drop the lawsuit against Poulson if Poulson apologized. Poulson didn't apologize, but indicated he wished the new mayor well. Two days before Yorty took office, the lawsuit was dropped. Yorty and Poulson issued a joint statement that they had been friends for twenty-five years and now regretted the "harsh charges" of the campaign.¹⁰⁴ Yorty also promised that he would give downtown LA the attention it deserved, not special treatment, but not neglect, either.

The city council removed the controversial property tax increase from the budget Poulson had submitted in the last weeks of his term. Yorty hinted at budget cuts for cultural affairs. But he ultimately supported the efforts of Dorothy Chandler (of the Chandler family that owned the *LA Times*) to construct the Music Center. By the time he ran for a second term, the *Times* supported him.

Yorty's lawyer succeeded through litigation in voiding the oil leases the City had signed, and which he had questioned. The trash issue remained on the table, but eventually the recycling and inconvenient pickups were halted. New commissioners were appointed to various boards. Basically, Yorty started his first term without major hiccups and the calamity the *Times* had feared didn't occur. The world, in short, continued to turn.

Lessons Learned

We started this chapter with reference to the 2016 presidential election and the unexpected election of Donald Trump, the outsider candidate. Yorty was an outsider, but in a different sense than Trump. Yorty was a long-time politician who had plenty of experience in running for office.

Yorty knew how government worked. So it is not surprising that despite the *Times*' pre-election prognostications, his administration got off to an orderly start. Nor is it surprising that rather than hold on to campaign grudges, he sought to make peace with former opponents. It is not surprising that he would seek to patch up things with the *Times*. Why make a permanent enemy of the major newspaper in the local area if there was no need to do so? In all these ways, Yorty was very different from Trump who had limited knowledge of government, who started his administration without many key officials in

¹⁰³Yorty supported the appointment of Gilbert Lindsay, the first black city council member. Tom Bradley's biography, which not surprisingly takes a dim view of Yorty, suggests he supported Lindsay to thwart Bradley. But it also says Yorty supported Bradley unsolicited when the latter ran for city council. J. Gregory Payne and Scott C. Ratzan, *Tom Bradley: The Impossible Dream* (Roundtable Publishing, 1986), pp. 63, 67. Yorty's version in his Oral History was that he supported Bradley initially, but Police Chief Parker told him Bradley was a bad choice so he stopped supporting him. Yorty Oral History, p. 117. Bradley's Oral History says that Yorty supported him indirectly through staff members, but never made a statement himself. Bradley Oral History, p. 105.

¹⁰⁴"Yorty Drops Slander Suit on Poulson," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1961, p. B1.

place and with infighting in the White House, and who continued after the election to attack former opponents and the news media.

But there are also similarities. Yorty held inconsistent political views over time, starting out left and ending right, but never 100% of one or the other. His goal was to win office, not to institute a particular agenda. Agendas were instruments to win, not reasons to win. Yorty was not one to apologize; he would officially “regret” that harsh accusations were made in the 1961 mayoral campaign, but never quite say he was sorry he had made them. His UCLA Oral History interview in the 1980s is basically a self-justification for whatever he did throughout his career.

Yorty was a man with what would later be called “self-esteem,” and plenty of it. Certainly, he never would accept the criticisms of his campaigns against Bradley. According to Bradley, after he finally defeated Yorty in 1973, Yorty never called him to give the traditional congratulations expected of losing candidates.¹⁰⁵ The Watts Riot might have occurred on Yorty’s watch, but he had no regrets about his actions before, during, or after that event. When Yorty lost an election, he was the victim; not just the guy who was less popular.

Yorty had a keen sense of the dissatisfaction within the electorate with the downtown elite that had dominated LA politics and government. In contrast, the downtown elite had no such sense of themselves; they couldn’t imagine that what they viewed as the civic duty of the right sort of people to guide municipal affairs would not be appreciated by ordinary folks. The problem with those ordinary folks was that they didn’t bother to turn out in sufficient numbers on Election Day to show their appreciation.

Yorty also understood that the relatively new medium, television, could be used to compete with newspaper coverage. And he understood that constantly making charges against his opponent – attack, attack, attack – made for good TV. It was exciting. Indeed, the *LA Times* itself could not ignore him, even if its reporting was slanted. It’s in that sense that 1961 in Los Angeles was a forerunner of 2016 nationwide.

¹⁰⁵Bradley Oral History, p. 184.