Upton Sinclair and the Los Angeles Times: A Content Analysis

By John F. Kirch
Introduction

On August 28, 1934, Socialist Upton Sinclair shocked the political world by winning the Democratic nomination for governor of California. His campaign—which promised to revitalize the state’s idle factories and farms through a series of government-organized colonies—drew attention from across the Depression-weary nation and scared the state’s business establishment into organizing what historian Greg Mitchell has described as “nothing less than a revolution”—the first modern media campaign.¹

Waged by such men as Harry Chandler of the Los Angeles Times,² Louis Mayer of Metro-Goldwin-Mayer³ and C.C. Teague of Sunkist,⁴ the anti-Sinclair campaign brought together for the first time in an American election the use of film, radio, direct mail, opinion polls, and national fund raising.⁵ Through the use of these media and political techniques, Sinclair was falsely painted a Communist, a renegade and an atheist who advocated free love and the nationalization of children. Quotations from his various books were distorted, printed in circulars and distributed to millions of voters; phony “newsreels” that drew connections between Sinclair’s proposals and Russian Communism were filmed by the Hollywood studios and shown in theaters throughout the state; and the metropolitan press either ignored or attacked his candidacy, showing little patience for the practice of objective journalism.⁶ Said Los Angeles Times political editor Kyle Palmer in a conversation with a New York Journalist: “We don’t go in for that kind of crap that you have back in New York—of being obliged to print both sides. We’re going to beat this son of a bitch Sinclair any way we can. We’re going to kill him.”⁷
Indeed they did. When it was over, Sinclair was soundly defeated by Republican Governor Frank F. Merriam in what *Time* magazine called the “greatest smear campaign ever waged in an American election.”

How was this campaign orchestrated? What specific techniques were used to defeat Sinclair, and who was involved? This paper will explore the 1934 California gubernatorial election. It will give a brief historical overview to explain the various forces that came together to destroy Sinclair and his hopes for a socialist experiment in the Golden State. It will then focus on one of the major players in the anti-Sinclair campaign, the *Los Angeles Times*, to see how Kyle Palmer’s promise to “beat the son of a bitch” was translated onto the pages of one of California’s largest newspapers.

**History of the 1934 California Gubernatorial Election**

Upton Sinclair’s campaign for governor began in 1933, when, at the urging of Gilbert Stevenson and the Los Angeles County Democratic Committee, he switched his party registration from Socialist to Democrat. This move was no small matter for Sinclair. He had devoted more than thirty years to the socialist cause and had even run for public office three times on the party’s ticket—first in 1920 when he campaigned for the U.S. House of Representatives and again in 1922 (U.S. Senate), 1926 and 1930 (the last two times for governor). In explaining his decision to join the Democrats, Sinclair said he had little choice but to go to a political organization that was big enough to make him a credible candidate. “Fifty percent of the people are going to vote a certain ticket because their grandfathers voted that ticket,” Sinclair said. “In order to get anywhere, it is necessary to have a party which has grandfathers.”
Shortly after announcing his intention to run for governor, Sinclair wrote a book that was part fiction, part political platform. *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future,* was published in October 1933 and outlined his proposals for the state. His plan, which became known as End Poverty in California, or EPIC, became a rallying cry for supporters. Citizens poured into Sinclair’s small office in Beverly Hills to meet the candidate and volunteer for his campaign. Before long, EPIC clubs were being organized throughout California and Sinclair found himself traveling from one corner of the state to the other to explain his socialist program.

The EPIC plan was premised on the belief that capitalism had failed because it was based on a production-for-profit system. Under his proposal, the state would take control of idle land and factories and organize them into a system of “production-for-use” colonies. Workers would produce only what they could consume, with any surplus going to other colonies in exchange for products they made. The remainder of the EPIC plan included a host of new taxes on the wealthy and big business. In addition, it called for a $50 per month pension for the elderly, the needy, and widowed women with dependent children, provided these citizens had lived in the state for at least three years. The plan, which was heavily criticized almost from the beginning, was moderated somewhat later, although many of its basic provisions survived.

On the strength of these proposals, Sinclair won the Democratic nomination on August 28, defeating a field of eight other candidates. In addressing the press the following day, Sinclair did not mince words in blaming capitalism for the unemployment that had stricken the nation for nearly five years and left a fifth of California’s population in poverty. “We confront today the collapse of an institution which is worldwide and..."
age-old,” he said. “Capitalism has served its time and is passing from the earth. A new system must be found to take its place. . . . We are not proposing to replace the whole collapsing system by a new one all at once. We are proposing the first step, a trial stage.”

Words like these and his strong showing in the polls caught the attention of the business establishment. There was no doubt that Sinclair would have to be taken seriously. Unlike his three previous campaigns, when Sinclair ran as a Socialist and was not given much chance of winning, his 1934 candidacy as a Democrat was considered a serious challenge to incumbent Governor Frank F. Merriam. Sinclair had received more than 436,000 votes in the primary, significantly more than Merriam polled in the Republican contest. In addition, the number of Democratic voters in California had grown substantially and, by 1934, had surpassed the number of GOP voters in the state. Sinclair’s candidacy had also generated widespread interest. An estimated 25,000 more votes had been cast in the Democratic primary than in the Republican one. If California was to be protected from the muckraker’s “radical” proposals, the establishment would have to step in and save the state’s people from themselves.

The attacks on Sinclair, which started almost immediately, came from several fronts, including Merriam and the Republicans, the business community, Hollywood, and the state’s newspapers, almost all of which were editorially against the Democrat.

The Republicans. Governor Merriam urged voters not to view the election as the traditional struggle between Democrats and Republicans, instead framing the debate as one of Communism vs. Americanism. Merriam and his supporters argued that Sinclair was not a true Democrat, but rather a Socialist interloper who had wrested control of the
party away from its more moderate wing. Torrey Everett, the president of the Republican Club of Pasadena, summed up the GOP position in late September, saying that “whoever casts a vote for a candidate other than Merriam may be responsible for the election of Sinclair and is as much of a traitor to true Americanism as the man who willfully fires a blank cartridge instead of a bullet in defense of the flag.”

Business community. The business community operated independently of the Merriam-for-Governor campaign. It organized “front groups” that were used to raise money and push the cause against “Sinclairism.” The most active of these was C.C. Teague’s United for California League, which was heavily funded by some of the state’s richest men. Although the group was involved in developing radio spots, raising money, and financing public speakers, one of its most effective strategies was to use Sinclair’s own words against him. The group took selected quotations from Sinclair’s writings and printed them on leaflets that were distributed to millions of voters. Many of these quotations were taken out of context and left the reader with the impression that Sinclair was anti-Church or even a sexual pervert. For example, one leaflet—entitled Upton Sinclair, Defiler of all Churches and All Christian Institutions—starts with a quote from Sinclair’s book The Profits of Religion and reads: “There are a score of great religions in the world, each with scores or hundreds of sects, each with its priestly orders, its complicated creed and ritual, its heavens and hells; each damns all the others and each is a mighty fortress of graft.”

Sinclair, in a book he wrote after the election, acknowledged that this particular quote was accurate. But he said it had been taken out of context to intentionally leave the impression he was an atheist who scorned religious institutions. “Yes, that is the thesis of
the book,” Sinclair wrote in response to the pamphlet. “And that it is true is my sorrow, not my fault.”

Another pamphlet also quotes from *The Profits of Religion* and made Sinclair out to be a pervert. As the flyer quoted: “Who does not know the genius of revolt who demonstrates his repudiation of private property by permitting his lady loves to support him? Who does not know the man who finds in the phrases of revolution the most effective devices for the seducing of young girls?”

Sinclair was upset by this misuse of his words and commented extensively on it in his postelection book, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*. To the passage quoted above, Sinclair said: “What do you make of these two sentences, thus taken out of their context? Manifestly, the ignorant reader is supposed to draw the conclusion that I am in favor of the seducing of young girls.” He then goes on to quote the passage in its original context to show it’s true meaning. As the reader can see, Sinclair was anything but a sexual pervert.

It is our fundamental demand that society shall cease to repeat over and over the blunders of the past, the blunders of tyranny and slavery, of luxury and poverty, which wrecked the ancient societies; and surely it is a poor way to begin by repeating in our own persons the most ancient blunders of the moral life. To light the fires of lust in our hearts, and let them smoulder there, and imagine we are trying new experiments in psychology! Who does not know the radical woman who demonstrates her emancipation from convention by destroying her nerves with nicotine? Who does not know the genius of revolt who demonstrates his repudiation of private property by permitting his lady loves to support him? Who does not know the man who finds in the phrases of revolution the most effective devices for the seducing of young girls?

Hollywood. The movie industry also got into the act. The seven major studios began by instituting a Merriam-for-Governor tax on higher salaried employees, assessing each worker one-day’s pay to assist in the Republican effort. Movie executives then declared that they would move the film industry out of California if Sinclair were
elected—a threat that was made even more real by newspaper stories reporting how Arizona and Florida, among others, were making bids for the Hollywood business. In addition, the studios fabricated newsreels against Sinclair and showed them in the leading motion-picture houses in almost every city and town. One “newsreel” showed large numbers of vagrants crossing into California in response to Sinclair’s promise to help the unemployed. The film, it turned out, was taken on the streets of Los Angeles with cameras from the studios. The “vagrants” were really actors on the studio payroll.

MGM was a major player in this effort. The studio created a character known as the “inquiring reporter,” who supposedly went around the state interviewing Californians about the Sinclair-Merriam campaign. In reality, the reporter and the people he interviewed were actors. In one spot, the interviewer approaches an old lady who is sitting on her front porch. “For whom are you voting, Mother?” the interviewer asks. “I am voting for Governor Merriam,” the old lady replies, “because I want to save my little home. It is all I have left in this world.” In another newsreel, the interviewer approaches what a New York Times reporter described as a “shaggy man with bristling Russian whiskers and a menacing look in his eye.” When the on-screen reporter asks for whom he is voting, the man answers in a full Russian accent: “Vy, I am foting for Seenclair. His system worked vell in Russia, vy can’t it vork here?”

The press. The press was no better. A survey of 129 daily and 400 weekly newspapers showed that more than 90 percent of them had endorsed Merriam, 5 percent had endorsed a third party candidate, Raymond Haight, and the rest made no endorsement. The San Francisco Chronicle often referred to Sinclair as an “erstwhile
Socialist” while the *Los Angeles Times* repeatedly called Sinclair the “Socialist-Democrat,” even though he had not sought and did not receive the Socialist Party’s nomination.\(^3^7\)

Like the pamphlets distributed by United for California, the *Los Angeles Times* also took excerpts from Sinclair’s books and ran them in boxes that appeared on the front page during the final six weeks of the campaign. The boxes carried short titles such as “Sinclair on the Knights of Columbus”\(^3^8\) or “Sinclair on Boy Scouts.”\(^3^9\) The quotations that followed were typically only four or five sentences long. They were printed without context and usually offensive to a particular group. For example, on October 1, the *Los Angeles Times* published a box on its front page with the title “Sinclair on Catholics.” The quote, in its entirety, read as follows:

> But the Catholics go on and on, like the patient spider, building and rebuilding his web across a doorway. . . It is no longer possible to do without Catholics in America; not merely do ditches have to be dug, roads graded, coal minded and dishes washed, but franchises have to be granted, tariff schedules adjusted, juries and courts manipulated, police trained and strikes crushed. . . You take the liberty of thinking, nevertheless, you feel safe because the law will protect you. But do you imagine this “law” applies to your Catholic neighbors? Do you imagine that they are bound by the restraints that bind you?--From “The Profits of Religion,” Book III, “The Church of the Servant Girls,” By Upton Sinclair, 1931 edition, Pages 106, 108, 117.

Other boxes had Sinclair nationalizing children, advocating free love, or insulting citizens of various California cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco.\(^4^0\) Sinclair paid for radio time during the campaign in an attempt to explain how the newspaper was leaving out key words from his original work and taking his words out of context. But in the end he recognized he was no match for the daily barrage of “Sinclair quotations” that appeared every day in the *Los Angeles Times*. “Reading these boxes day after day, I made up my mind that the election was lost,” Sinclair wrote. “I said: ‘It is impossible that the voters will elect a man who has written that!’”\(^4^1\)
There is no doubt that the *Los Angeles Times* was editorially opposed to Sinclair. In addition to the boxes, the newspaper published forty-two editorials about the campaign between the nominating conventions and Election Day, all of which either criticized Sinclair or praised Merriam. But how did that opposition translate into the paper’s “objective” news columns? How many stories were written about the race and did they show a slant towards Merriam or against Sinclair? What issues were important? This study will look at the amount and the tone of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the 1934 campaign. It will also look at the content of the coverage to determine what issues became important and how the newspaper framed the debate between Republican Frank Merriam and Democrat Upton Sinclair.

**Methodology**

The content analysis focused on the *Los Angeles Times* between September 20, 1934, the day of the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions, and November 6, 1934, Election Day. The analysis covers stories that appeared on the news pages of the newspapers. Articles that appeared in the Society, Financial or other sections were not included in the sample. An article was defined as any story relating to the campaign that appeared under a regular headline, even if that article was only a few paragraphs long.

Stories were first divided into two categories. Articles that focused on Sinclair, his running mate, Sheridan Downey, or the Democratic Party’s efforts in the gubernatorial campaign were categorized as Sinclair/Democrats; stories that focused on Frank F. Merriam, his running mate, George Hatfield, or the Republicans were placed in the Merriam/Republicans category. Stories in each category were then coded based on three factors: prominence, tone and theme.
Prominence. The prominence of an article was defined by where the story was placed in the newspaper. At the time, the Los Angeles Times was divided into two parts, each with its own front page. The front section carried mostly national and international news, while section two covered mostly state and city events. For this analysis, a story was coded as appearing on either Page One, Page One-Section Two or on an Inside Page.

Tone. The coding for tone measured how each candidate was portrayed in the newspaper’s coverage. Stories were coded as either Positive, Negative or Neutral/Mixed. Tone relied on the subjective analysis of the coder. To maintain coding consistency, key words in headlines and the lead paragraph were used as a guide. Stories in which the candidate was praised or supported, for example, were coded as Positive toward the candidate. Articles in which a candidate was attacked, snubbed or involved in scandal were coded as Negative. Neutral/Mixed was left for stories that were balanced or contained both positive and negative elements about the candidate, his party or his proposals.

Theme. The theme category was designed to see what type of stories were written about each candidate and the issues used to frame the political debate. There were nine themes: Endorsement/Denouncement, Campaign Advance, Campaign Organizational Activity, Horse Race, Party Unity/Division, Candidate Profile, Ideology, Religion, and General Government Policy. A separate category of miscellaneous was created for articles that did not fit in one of the nine main themes.

An article was coded as having an Endorsement/Denouncement theme if it reported on third party individuals or organizations either endorsing or criticizing a candidate. The Campaign Advance theme covered stories in which a candidate’s future
schedule (including regular campaign appearances or radio broadcasts) was published in advance so that interested voters could either attend the campaign event or listen to the broadcast. The Campaign Organizational Activity theme was designed for stories that reported routine internal party events, such as the opening of a local campaign headquarters. An article was coded as a Horse Race story if it reported on a poll or a prediction about the candidates’ chances of victory. The Party Unity/Division theme was used for stories that discussed internal party unity or strife, such as politicians uniting for the nominating conventions or dividing after the resignation of a key party official. The Ideology theme covered articles in which the candidates’ political philosophies were compared, while articles were coded as having a Religion theme if the religious beliefs of the candidates were discussed. A story was coded as having a General Government Policy theme if it reported on the candidates’ public policy proposals, such as employee pension plans or taxes. And the Personality Profile theme was used to code general stories about the candidates themselves.

Articles that covered more than one theme were coded twice. For example, a story in which Merriam was endorsed by a group because of his ideological stand on socialism would be coded as having both an Endorsement and Ideology theme.

Results

The Los Angeles Times published 213 stories about the Sinclair-Merriam campaign between the conventions and the election. One-hundred nineteen stories, or 56 percent, fell into the Merriam/Republicans category and ninety-four, or 44 percent, were categorized as Sinclair/Democrat stories. [See Figure 1]
Sinclair received slightly more prominence in his coverage, with fifteen Sinclair/Democrat stories appearing on Page One, seven appearing on Page One-Section Two and the remaining seventy-two falling on the Inside Pages. The *Los Angeles Times* placed eight Merriam/Republican stories on the front page, eight on Page One-Section Two and 103 on the inside of the newspaper.

The tone of the coverage is the first indication of the newspaper’s bias against Sinclair. Of the ninety-four stories written about Sinclair, sixty-nine of them, or 73 percent, were coded as having a Negative tone toward the Democrat, while twenty-five of the Sinclair/Democrat articles, or 27 percent, were coded as Neutral/Mixed. None of the articles written about Sinclair were coded as portraying the candidate in a positive light.

Merriam, on the other hand, received favorable coverage. Of the 119 stories written about the governor, fifty-five of them, or 46 percent, were coded as having a Positive tone toward the Republican, and sixty-four of the articles, or 54 percent, were coded as Neutral/Mixed. Merriam stories received no Negative codings.

Merriam’s high positive ratings reflect several factors. He received thirty-five endorsements that were reported in the *Los Angeles Times* during the sample period, twenty-nine of which were coded as Positive. In addition, the newspaper ran six favorable candidate profiles about Merriam that depicted the governor as a hard working, down-to-earth politician who understood the plight of the people. For example, in one story the *Los Angeles Times* wrote:

> But what kind of a personality is this Frank Merriam, who goes so unpretentiously along attending to his business, which happens to be the State’s business? . . . In the first place, it’s a full time job finding this Governor of ours. Just when one thinks he has him corralled he turns up an airplane ride away. It appears that when there is anything to be done, problem to be solved or something to be seen to, the Governor doesn’t wait for the question to meet up with him—he goes where it bounces, settles it and when an inquisitive reporter shows up all aglow with perspicacity Merriam is just as apt to be on some distant firing line.43

- 13 -
In another article, *Los Angeles Times* writer Chapin Hill wrote, “I don’t know what size shoes the Governor wears, but I do like the way he keeps both of them on the ground. . . There is nothing impulsive about the Governor and there will be no experiments with quack remedies while he is at the helm.”

Sinclair’s negatives came in several areas. First, the *Los Angeles Times* published thirty-three stories in which Sinclair came under direct attack from local lawyers, entertainment personalities, various organizations and the newspaper itself. There were also sixteen stories in which Sinclair’s Democratic Party was portrayed as divided over his candidacy. Sinclair’s side of the story was rarely included in any of these articles. Occasionally, the newspaper would print a story allowing Sinclair to counter his critics, but it was usually short in length and came long after the initial criticism. For example, the newspaper published a front page story on October 16 under the headline, “Cobb Declares Sinclair Policies Shy on Sanity.” The article, which was written by political commentator Irvin S. Cobb, was twenty-one paragraphs long and, among other things, called Sinclair “this mad, well-intended but misguided, dancing dervish advocate of Communism.” Sinclair’s response was reported three days later and included only two paragraphs buried at the end of another story that appeared on page six.

The newspaper also wrote two stories that made Sinclair look like a hypocrite. The premise of both was that while Sinclair talked about his desire to help the common man, he actually lived a life of luxury. One of the articles reported that Sinclair was weary from his primary campaign and had decided to abandon “his palatial home in an exclusive Beverly Hills residential district” to vacation at the “luxurious Palos Verdes” mansion of Kate Crane Gartz. The article reads: “Worn by the labors of his candidacy,
which he says is purely in the interests of the downtrodden, the ex-Socialist Democratic gubernatorial nominee is living luxuriously at the Gartz home. He has been whiling away the hours sunning himself on the extensive lawns or walking on the beach."\(^{46}\)

Another factor that contributed to Merriam’s positive and Sinclair’s negatives was the tone of the headlines. While the newspaper’s articles about Merriam started with headlines like “Women leaders battle to elect Gov. Merriam,” “Union Aide Backs GOP,” and “Merriam is Safe, Sane,” the headlines for Sinclair articles were highly negative, such as: “Roosevelt’s Snub Blow to Sinclair,” “EPIC Spells Fiscal Ruin of California,” “Sinclair Unfitted for High Post He Seeks,” and “Economic Chaos Should Sinclair Be Elected.”\(^{47}\)

In addition to the tone of the news coverage, the themes that the *Los Angeles Times* focused on during the campaign also reveal a bias. Two themes that showed up the most in the coverage of both candidates were Endorsement/Denouncement and Ideology.

*Endorsement/Denouncement.* The *Los Angeles Times* wrote seventy stories that were coded as having an Endorsement/Denouncement theme, with thirty-five stories devoted to each candidate. All of the Merriam stories that fell into this category were endorsements. By contrast, only two of the Sinclair stories that fell into this theme were endorsements. The other thirty-three were harsh denouncements. A typical Sinclair denouncement appeared on the front page on September 28. Under a headline that read, “Sinclair Flayed for Working on Fears of Public,” the story quotes Robert Dyer Hobday of the Constitution Society as saying, “The EPIC leader has painted with his poison
pencil of fear upon the canvas of ignorance and the good people bitten by this rattlesnake of misinformation have indeed been poisoned.” There was no response from Sinclair on the three-paragraph story.

Even in the two Sinclair endorsement articles, the Los Angeles Times focused on the negative. On September 22, for example, the newspaper reported that 600 delegates to the California State Federation of Labor’s convention voted to endorse Sinclair. The second paragraph, however, immediately focused on the small number of people who opposed the endorsement. “One of four or five delegates who voted ‘No’ on the Sinclair resolution, Dan Murphy of San Francisco, explained his objection on the ground that the resolution ‘put the cart before the horse,’” the story reads. The third paragraph continues with a quote from Murphy, in which he says: “Before I’d vote for a man I want to convince myself his policies are right. We have made the mistake of voting support for Sinclair before first considering his economic plan.” It isn’t until the sixth paragraph before the nine-paragraph story refers back to the fact that the union had actually endorsed Sinclair’s campaign.48

Merriam, meanwhile, appeared to have the support of every imaginable group. The newspaper reported endorsements from farmers, war veterans, the state’s real estate association, church groups, a handful of former city mayors and several prominent Democrats. Even when a group’s “endorsement” was nebulous at best, the headline gave the impression that Merriam had received strong and widespread support. For example, on October 7, the Los Angeles Times ran an article on page thirteen under a triple-deck headline that read as follows: “Farm Swing to Merriam: Sinclair Plan Stirs Fears: Walnut Grower Reports Rural Districts’ Voters Favor Republican.” Although the
headline makes it appear as if a poll or official vote was taken in which farmers threw their support to Merriam, the entire story is based on the opinion of only one man—Raymond W. Miller, a Liden, California, walnut grower who just happened to be the head of the Northern California farm division of the Merriam Nonpartisan campaign. As the newspaper reported, Miller claimed to know that farmers were lining up behind Merriam, but there was no supporting evidence or polls to back up the assertion.

**Ideology.** Ideology was the second biggest theme that appeared in the newspaper’s coverage during the sample period. The *Los Angeles Times* published sixty stories that covered the ideology of the two candidates, with thirty-six of those focusing on Sinclair and twenty-four on Merriam.

Most of these stories reflected the ideological argument as framed by Merriam: that the election was between Americanism and Communism. That might be expected in stories quoting Merriam. Yet, even though Sinclair attempted to argue that the election was a class struggle in which the poor were fighting to free themselves from the shackles of Wall Street, most of the articles about Sinclair framed the debate as a fight between Americanism and Communism.49 In mid-October, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* did a series of articles by writer Chapin Hill that focused on Sinclair’s EPIC program. The stories were highly critical of the plan, rarely allowed Sinclair to answer any of the criticisms it raised, and often compared the Democrat’s proposals to Russian Communism or social policies that had failed in other states. One of these articles, for example, begins with this lead: “It would be an endless job to list the experiments in Socialism made in this country alone. All of them have failed.”50 In another of the Hill articles, the newspaper draws a connection between the EPIC plan and Russian
Communism. It then goes on to say, “Family life in Russia is a thing only to be remembered by the drudges whose only business now is to produce for the state. . .”\textsuperscript{51}

By contrast, Merriam and his supporters had free reign to cast the ideological debate in any light they chose. The newspaper never challenged the assertions made by Merriam, Hatfield and other Republicans. For example, on October 21, Merriam was quoted as saying, “Communists have attempted to destroy food supplies to whole cities, and have worked their way into schools and colleges.”\textsuperscript{52} This assertion was neither supported by Merriam nor challenged by the newspaper’s reporters—at least not in the story.

\textit{Campaign Advance/Organizational Activity}. The \textit{Los Angeles Times} was more subtle when it came to reporting on routine campaign advances and the organizational activity of the political parties, but the coverage was just as biased. The newspaper published sixteen Merriam/Republican stories that fell into the Campaign Advance theme. These articles typically reported on the governor’s itinerary, such as where Merriam planned to be the following day or what time and on what station he would deliver a radio address. This gave voters a chance to either attend the campaign event or to listen to the broadcast. By contrast, the newspaper did not run any advances for Sinclair. While three Sinclair/Democrat articles fell into the Campaign Advance theme, each one reported on how a third party individual or group was planning to discuss the subject of Sinclair at an upcoming meeting. One of these ran under the headline “Neblett to Strike at Sinclair Plan” and reported that, “Attorney William H. Neblett. . .will go on the air over Station KHJ and the Don Lee broadcasting system at 9:15 o’clock tonight, in what is scheduled to be a complete, detailed analysis of Upton Sinclair’s EPIC plan. . .”\textsuperscript{53}
The newspaper published nineteen Merriam/Republican stories with a Campaign Organizational Activity theme. Only four Sinclair/Democrat stories fell into this category. Most of the Merriam stories reported on various Merriam-for-Governor clubs that were forming around the state and opening headquarters. This left the impression that Merriam had strong grassroots support with well-organized groups working for him throughout California. The lack of any Sinclair stories in this category made the subtle impression that the Democrat was having trouble attracting grassroots support—despite the fact that dozens of EPIC clubs were organizing around the state.\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{Horse Race}. There were few Horse Race stories written compared to today’s standards. Of the fourteen articles that fell into this category, eight focused on Merriam and six on Sinclair. Seven of the Merriam stories that fell into this theme reported on the \textit{Literary Digest} straw poll that showed the Republican in the lead. The remaining stories that fell into this theme—whether about Merriam or Sinclair—either reported on predictions about the race or campaign strategy. The overall impression left by these articles was that Merriam had strong support. He led in the \textit{Literary Digest} poll while different groups were quoted saying they believed the governor would be re-elected. The \textit{Los Angeles Times} even went as far as to quote a British psychic who predicted that “Gov. Merriam will be elected.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Party Unity/Division}. The newspaper published twenty-five stories that had a theme of Party Unity/Division. Four of these were about Merriam/Republicans, while twenty-one focused on Sinclair/Democrats. Most of the Sinclair articles that fell into this theme reported on Democratic leaders who were abandoning his campaign, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and George Creel, whom Sinclair had defeated in the
Democratic primary. In the president’s case, Roosevelt had declined to endorse Sinclair, saying that he would not get involved in a local election. Creel had initially backed Sinclair, but decided late in the campaign that he could not support the EPIC plan. The newspaper’s coverage clearly left the impression that the Republicans were united while the Democrats were in disarray. However, one cannot conclude that the newspaper’s coverage of division within the Democratic Party was an indication of bias because the Democrats were in fact divided over Sinclair’s candidacy. In addition to Creel, several prominent and well-financed Democrats deserted Sinclair for Merriam. Moreover, California’s Democratic U.S. senator, William G. McAdoo, left the state shortly after the party’s nominating convention and remained silent about the race—although quotations from an anti-Sinclair speech McAdoo had delivered during the Democratic primary suddenly appeared on billboards around the state. In this case, it appears, the *Los Angeles Times* was covering the story accurately.

*Other themes.* The other themes that were detected in the newspaper’s coverage did not reveal any significant patterns other than what has already been discussed. There were twelve stories published with the theme of General Government Policy, twelve that focused on Religion, eight that fell into the Personality Profile (discussed earlier) and six that were in the miscellaneous category.

**Conclusion**

There is little doubt that Kyle Palmer’s promise to kill Upton Sinclair was evident on the news pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. While the newspaper placed Sinclair articles on the front page more often, the vast majority of the articles written about the Democratic candidate were negative in tone and focused on two themes: the debate
about his socialist ideology, which was characterized as bad, and the long list of organizations and individuals who denounced him. By contrast, Merriam enjoyed good coverage, with almost half of the stories written about him portraying him in a positive light. The Merriam coverage centered on his thirty-five endorsements, including several from prominent Democrats. The articles also provided readers of the Los Angeles Times with information about when and where the governor would be speaking so that anyone who was interested could tune in. Sinclair’s itinerary was ignored. In addition, the newspaper reported on the many Merriam-for-Governor clubs that sprang up around the state, while ignoring the EPIC clubs that also formed, leaving the impression that Merriam alone had strong grassroots support.

The Merriam/Republican stories that fell into the Ideology theme usually reflected the Republican line of reasoning that socialism is bad public policy. They typically quoted the governor or his supporters directly and never challenged the basis of their arguments. Sinclair’s ideological beliefs, on the other hand, were put under a microscope and harshly criticized.

What impact this coverage had on the election outcome is beyond the reach of this paper. But by the time voters went to the ballot box on November 6, 1934, Sinclair’s amazing primary victory of only three months before must have seemed like a distant memory. Merriam won the election with a vote of 1,138,620 to 879,537.59
Notes


2 Ibid., 32.

3 Ibid., xiii.

4 Ibid., 139-140.

5 Ibid., xii.


8 Singer, “California Gubernatorial Campaign,” 387.

9 Ibid., 376.


12 Ibid., 20.

13 Ibid., 20-25.


18 Kevles, review of *Campaign of the Century*, 252.

19 By 1933, the Socialist Party had a national membership of only 18,548 and a California membership of 1,238. See Leader, “Upton Sinclair’s EPIC Switch,” 363. Sinclair himself felt he could not win as long as he stayed with the Socialist Party. In a letter Sinclair wrote to his son David on November 13, 1933, the candidate said, “So long as I was a Socialist I was just one more crank; but when I call myself a Democrat, I become a man worth listening to.” See Mitchell, *Campaign of the Century*, 248.

20 Kevles, review of *Campaign of the Century*, 252.


Mitchell, Campaign of the Century, 200-201.

Sinclair, How I Got Licked, 64.

Ibid.

Ibid., 69.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Singer, “California Gubernatorial Campaign,” 393.


Singer, “California Gubernatorial Campaign,” 393-394.


Ibid.


Both the Communist and Socialist parties opposed Sinclair’s candidacy during the campaign. See Singer, “California Gubernatorial Campaign,” 388.


Sinclair, How I Got Licked, 144.


Selected Bibliography


