

## Political pundits are quoted again and again by the press

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**By Sherry Sylvester**

In the rough-and-tumble world of Texas politics, they are verbal quick-draw artists, always ready with a clever sound bite or a pithy observation.

"If (Gov. Rick) Perry is right about (Tony) Sanchez and Sanchez is right about Perry, God save us all. One of 'em is going to be governor of Texas," said Cal Jillson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University, on the eve of the Nov. 5 election.

His academic colleague, Jerry Polinard, a political science professor at the University of Texas-Pan American, dished up this pearl early in the Texas campaign — "You take an issue that should put you on the defensive and actually use it against your opponent."

Jillson, Polinard and a small cadre of political science professors were quoted in the Texas press nearly 300 times in the final weeks of last month's general election.

Speaking mostly about the gubernatorial race between Perry and Sanchez and the U.S. Senate race between John Cornyn and Ron Kirk, reporters called on these professionals repeatedly to decipher the code of the state's increasingly complex political scene.

"Context is what we provide more than anything else," Polinard said. "You speak in sound bites on subjects that could evoke an hour-and-a-half discussion."

The professors agree that their job as frequently quoted Texas talking heads is to provide readers with a better understanding of a campaign story by providing what Jillson calls "nonpartisan and clarifying" commentary.

But with so many media outlets relying on many of the same sources for context, detractors contend the relatively small pool of "experts" poses dangers.

Ray Sullivan, who served as the spokesman for Perry's campaign, believes the academics who commented regularly on the campaign trail this year overrate their skills.

"From a Republican standpoint, they were wrong more often than not," he said, charging that the pundits too often were "liberal and overly optimistic about the Democratic prospects this cycle."

Bruce Buchanan, a political science professor at the University of Texas, has been talking to reporters for nearly 20 years. He said he was first asked to comment by newspapers because of his research on presidential campaigns. Now, he often assumes the role of a referee.

"Seventy percent of my contacts are from reporters looking for an honest broker — somebody who is not affiliated with either side," Buchanan said.

But he adds that reporters frequently call for comment knowing in advance what the response is likely to be.

"You (reporters) can't quote yourself — at least, you're not supposed to," Buchanan said.

Polinard agrees that reporters are often looking for a particular quote when they ring his number, but he insists he "is perfectly willing not to give the expected answer if the research dictates that."

Bill Miller, an Austin-based political consultant and nonacademic, is frequently called on to comment about campaigns during those periods when he isn't involved in them. He said the

state's political debate is driven by straight shooters who pull no punches.

"That's the way the system works," he said. "Reporters go to people with experience. Clear comments should come fast. It's not a thumb-sucking experience, it's an emotional and intellectual reaction to current events."

Amy Jasperson, a political science professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, who is working on a study of San Antonio's media, dismissed Sullivan's bias charge and said the comments from academics who have researched voting behavior enhance the value of political news stories.

"Based on their knowledge and research, they can make judgments on current phenomena — sometimes they are right and sometimes they're wrong," she said.

But Sullivan believes the ivory tower of academics reduces their ability to make accurate political assessments.

"They were especially off the mark in predicting the governor's race," he said. "Their own opinions may be victimized by the company they keep in academic circles and college campuses where most opinion leans significantly to the left."

As for the professors, they insist they keep their own political views at bay.

"I don't define my professional mission as advocacy. I'm an analyst," Buchanan said. "My moral bias in the game is not either political party, it's the health of the system."

Jillson said he makes an effort never to officially meet any of the candidates that he offers opinions about, calling himself a "teacher, not an ideologue."

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Polinard has the same concerns, but he admits it isn't easy.

"I'm sure I've failed on that more than once, but what you do is try," he said. "You have an academic responsibility and you are being asked on the basis of your expertise and research."

Chris Arterton, dean of the Graduate School of Political

Management in Washington, frequently comments on politics, but he believes political scientists sometimes speak on issues they know little about.

Arterton's program stresses practical studies outside the scope of traditional political science.

"Their valuable expertise falls in narrow boundaries — yet, once

they make it into the Rolodex as quotable, they are often asked about topics outside their knowledge of hard research," he said.

But reporters on deadline are unlikely to stop calling for that good political quote. Jillson said he gives about 450 media interviews every year.