**Herding a Pack of Liars and Their Enablers**

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*The umpires have taken the field, signaling the start of the season of mendacity.*

By “umpires” I mean the Westchester County Fair Campaign Practices Committee—the panel of neutral arbiters that for the past 24 years has assumed the painstaking task of separating political fact from fiction.

A press release from the FCPC just crossed my desk, informing me they are once again open for business. So it’s official.

Let the mudslinging begin.

The objective is to call out the candidates on the distortions, half-truths and outright lies that are inevitably baked into campaign advertising. Studies have shown that negativity works, which is why we are afflicted with the crap every time we open our mailbox or reach for the remote.

According to a survey by the Project on Campaign Conduct that was cited by the FCPC, 59 percent of voters believe that all or most candidates deliberately “twist the truth,” and 39 percent think they deliberately lie. Forty-three percent believe that all or most candidates unfairly attack their opponents.

Cynical? Perhaps, but over the years the voter perception has been validated by the findings of the FCPC.

Before I go on, I should stress that the committee’s mission is strictly local. This isn’t about Hillary, Trump, etc. Nor does its watchdog role extend to other forms of lying such as petition fraud.

For instance, the committee had nothing to do with last week’s exposure of County Legislator Catherine Borgia, D-Ossining, and the leaders of the Peekskill Democratic Party, who submitted a batch of tainted signatures on behalf of a hapless candidate. More than a few of the names were out-of-district residents—including one voter who lived in Woodstock.

Candidate petitions are the purview of the Board of Elections, which, last I heard, was examining the veracity of the petitions filed by all six—yes, six—Democratic mayoral candidates in Mount Vernon.

From time to time a dead person shows up on the so-called “walk list” for signature gathering. I know this has happened in hardball Yonkers where the graveyards are filled with active voters.

Anyway, in 1991, Milt Hoffman, the well-respected journalist, wrote an editorial that cited the need for the creation of some sort of independent board of truth seekers to examine complaints from candidates who believed they were smeared by their opponents.

The League of Women Voters of Westchester met Hoffman’s challenge and the fair campaign practices committee was born.

In retirement, Hoffman served on the FCPC and for many years wrote up the committee’s findings, which are released to the press. He died last April.

There are currently 16 volunteer members on the FCPC. They do this out of a sense of civic duty and are pledged to act impartially—though querulous political operatives may try to dismiss them as biased.

Since 2006, the FCPC has gotten more than 100 complaints, split evenly between Democrats and Republicans.

The FCPC has no power of enforcement, so it must rely on the media to publicize its work as a means to hold candidates and their staffs accountable. Call it public shaming.

It works this way—the FCPC fields a complaint then calls in the candidates (or their surrogates) for a meeting so that both sides may be heard. The committee members deliberate and come to a conclusion, “Fair” or “Unfair.” Their decision is put into written form and emailed the next day to editors and reporters.

I pulled an example out of my file at random. It focused on the hotly contested 2014 state Senate race between Terrence Murphy and Justin Wagner in the 40th District. One of Murphy’s aides tweeted: “Radical leftist Wagner is a LAWYER who supports ILLEGALS sitting on juries.”

There was no evidence to support this claim and the tweet was judged unfair.

The tweet’s author, incidentally, never publicly corrected the statement. Murphy won the election.

So the FCPC findings are not necessarily game changers. But they are meant to keep the weasels honest.

If lies are left unanswered, they have a pernicious way of being accepted as the truth.

More about the FCPPC can be found by going to [faircampaignpractices.org](http://www.faircampaignpractices.org).

