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# Introduction to "The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations Of Party Politics"

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# Introduction to "The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations Of Party Politics"

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

## Introduction

This book aims to unite two research traditions that are usually seen as competing. With some noteworthy exceptions on both sides of the disciplinary aisle, one tradition has been articulated mainly by communications scholars and the other mainly by political scientists. To perform the nuptials, we deploy unique bodies of evidence from one of the more compelling presidential elections in living memory, the virtual dead heat of 2000. In the campaign, all the factors that drive political science models were in play at least some of the time – abiding elements of social structure, geography, party identification, and ideology; the economy and other aspects of the record of the previous administration; the perceived fitness of each candidate for executive office; and issues reaching back to the New Deal. But these factors did not operate automatically. They were activated and in some cases critically altered by campaign communication – its overall volume, its partisan direction, the consistency of messages across communications channels, and the rhetorical sophistication of the messages themselves.

To make our case, we focus on three phases in the general campaign and on the critical transitions between them. The first phase was produced by the conventions and lasted for more than a month. In this phase, predictions from econometric forecasting models for a comfortable victory by Al Gore seemed bound for success, as, of course, was Gore himself. This phase came to an abrupt end and the second phase began in late September when perceptions of Al Gore's character – of his honesty in particular – crashed. Overnight he went from being the

presumptive victor to fighting for his political life. In the third phase, he called up memories of the New Deal and succeeded in persuading a critical bloc of voters that George W. Bush was a threat to the Social Security system. In the byplay, however, Gore ignored the robust economy, which should have carried him to a comfortable victory. Still, his playing the New Deal card enabled him to win the popular vote.

But he lost the Electoral College and, with it, the election. The divergence between the popular vote and the Electoral vote is another theme of this book. In one sense, this takes us to the foundations of party politics and the origins of the republic. In another sense, it takes us to the frontier of political communication, in particular to the gap between parts of the television broadcast day. Al Gore won the popular vote by, at the end of the campaign, winning the battle for network news. George W. Bush won the Electoral College by, also at the end, winning the battle of the ads. These assertions are possible because by 2000, presidential elections had become a natural experiment on a continental scale. The New Deal-Social Security message that was critical to Gore's recovery was most effective where it did him the least good, in states he could not win and in states he could not lose. In closely fought states, states that were pivotal in the Electoral College, his message was blunted by the sheer weight of pro-Bush advertising.

In short, communication is critical in determining whether and if so how the economy, candidate traits, and issues function in a campaign. Sometimes the communication is directly by a candidate or a closely connected surrogate in intensely covered moments such as conventions or debates. Sometimes the channel is advertising or the news. It matters a lot if ads and news reinforce each other or work at odds. Failure to communicate can be as critical as active attempts at priming or moving opinion.

Saying such things aligns us with research in the tradition of communication studies that emphasizes contingency and the power of rhetoric. But much of that research is supposition, anecdote, or not strictly relevant to an aggregate phenomenon such as an election. The body of research on the other side, attuned more to "necessary" – as opposed to contingent – features of elections seems more robust, more thought through. But much of that research seems oddly antipolitical, ironically so, because most of it is by political scientists. Our view is that many of the propositions about recurring features of elections require

communications factors for their proper operation. Explicating those communications factors reveals just where contingency lurks, where strategic choice by candidates is possible or even necessary, and where a candidate can go wrong.

Explicating communications factors also forces us to question the role of campaign communications in enlightening voters. At one level, the 2000 campaign clearly *did* enlighten the electorate. The incidence of basically correct perception of candidates' positions on issues was greater at the end than at the beginning. But not every effect of the campaign lay in the domain of interests and issues. The campaign also processed highly manipulated images of candidates' character. And within the domain of issues, much depended on what was said – and not said – and on the resources each side could command to get its message out.

Our claims rest on analyses of three bodies of data. Most important is a massive “rolling cross section” survey of the 2000 electorate, the National Annenberg Election Survey. Fieldwork began in November 1999 and finished in January 2001. This book focuses on the over thirty-seven thousand respondents interviewed between Independence Day and Election Day. Alongside the survey and sometimes joined to it are bodies of advertising data, organized by day and by media market. The spatiotemporal pattern in ad buys, when combined with the rolling cross-section survey data, enables us to estimate the impact of ads with considerable efficiency. Finally, we tie the rolling cross-section data to a detailed analysis of campaign coverage in major newspapers but, more importantly, on the national TV networks.

The next part of this chapter lays out the book's analytic stakes in some detail. Then we further describe the survey, advertising, and news data. Finally, we describe the order of argument and the plan of the book.

## The Stakes

### *Forecasting Models and the Record of the Previous Administration*

According to all forecasting models, Al Gore was supposed to win handily. Not only was the economy robust but also ratings of Bill Clinton's handling of his job were very high. Even discounting for the fact that Gore was not Clinton and that the Democrats were shooting

for a third consecutive term, Gore should not have lost. Zaller (1998) reinforced this expectation by claiming that Bill Clinton's popularity in the face of the Monica Lewinsky scandal confirmed the importance of "fundamentals," most importantly the economy. The predictions to this effect and the body of research from which they derive are ably captured by a symposium in *PS: Political Science and Politics* in 2001. The seeds of a difficulty already lurked in the research, however, especially in Gelman and King (1993) and Campbell (2000). Both argue that one function of a campaign is to prime the economy and so ensure that this most "fundamental" of considerations operates as forecasting models say it should. Both argue that the economy will always be primed in fact, as it would always be in one side's interest to do so, just by different sides in different contexts.

In the first transition of the 2000 campaign, exactly this happened when Bill Clinton told the Democrats in convention to be more optimistic about and to take credit for the economy over which he had presided. Democratic identifiers did as they were told. This did not increase partisan bias in economic perceptions, it just removed a partisan perversity in perception that reflects the ongoing class basis of U.S. politics. The convention thus fulfilled the preconditions for the presidential election forecasting models. But when Gore failed to champion the message of Democratic prosperity, the effect faded. Despite both robust economic indicators and general public satisfaction, the economy could not burnish Gore's prospects on its own. The rhetoric of the convention got the preconditions right; Gore's silence stilled its potential effect.

Gore's refusal to prime the economy may have reflected anxiety about associating himself too closely with his predecessor. This anxiety underscores a contingency taken for granted in the forecasting models. The standard claim is that popular approval of an administration mainly reflects its management of the economy. Other elements in popularity are similarly policy-driven or reflect ongoing partisan bias that carries no net predictive significance. Judgment on the incumbent's personal life is just not a factor. What forecasters did not forecast is that a president could be regarded as a competent chief executive but a bad human being, someone whose moral failings undercut his successor's ability to embrace prosperity. We surmise that Gore calculated that a tie to Bill Clinton the man would diminish his prospects more

than a tie to the Clinton economy would enhance them. We suspect he was wrong. Whatever we think, the link between Al Gore and Bill Clinton created a contingency, a strategic choice and a challenge to Gore's rhetorical skill. The unfolding of the story reversed the logic outlined in Zaller (1998).

### *The Persuasibility of the Electorate*

A pivotal event was the collapse in Al Gore's reputation as a man of character. There are many things to say about this but the first is that the collapse was quintessentially a media phenomenon, involving ads and news working in concert. A claim that media effects matter to the electoral bottom line is still controversial, notwithstanding the emergence of serious research with data from the field. For decades, the standing position in political science scholarship was the "minimal effects" model. It is useful to think of this model in terms of two mediating factors in any attempt at persuasive communication:

- How likely is the message to be received by the target audience?
- How likely are receivers, once they get the message, to yield to its persuasive content?

Among political scientists, these questions are associated with Zaller (1992). This sequence was first identified by the Yale studies of attitude change and social influence, typified by Hovland and Janis (1959) and brilliantly synthesized by McGuire (1968, 1969). It was independently identified by Converse (1962), although he seems never to have connected his insight to the Yale school one. Converse's 1962 idea lay mainly dormant, however, until Zaller (1990, 1991, 1992) resurrected it and explicitly linked it to McGuire's synthesis.<sup>1</sup> Early communications studies in sociology and social psychology drew skeptical conclusions about each mediating factor. The standard view was that persuasive messages are unlikely to reach their target audience, at least not in an unmediated way. Audience members who do get the message resist it. Those susceptible to the message never get it. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) classic study of the two-step flow of

<sup>1</sup> Zaller's recovery of the older perspective was not unaided, but was the culminating manifestation of a perspective also exemplified by Sniderman (1975) and whose unifying thread leads to DiPalma and McClosky (1970).

social communication argued that the audience never gets the message, not in its original form. Most hear it only second hand, after it has been reinterpreted by opinion leaders to blunt its dynamic intent. Besides, most persons are well armed to resist messages. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) documented cognitive bias in perception of candidates' issue positions, bias motivated by voters' own prior partisan commitments. Partisan stereotyping is another mechanism by which a persuasive message can be frustrated (Conover and Feldman, 1989).<sup>2</sup> By 1960, the various mutually reinforcing elements in the pattern had come to be seen as the "minimal effects" model (Klapper, 1960). The continuing grip of the model is nicely captured by Finkel (1993).

By the 1970s, however, skepticism about the minimal effects model could already be heard. Steven Chaffee, for instance, pointedly claimed that "the limited effects model is simply not believed" by the contributors to his edited volume (Chaffee, 1975: p. 19). It is telling, however, that this *cri de coeur* came from the field of communications research – with its professional stake in finding effects from the very thing it studies – not from political science. But Chaffee was not merely whistling in the wind. McCombs and Shaw (1972) had already staked out an empirical case that the media could at least set the agenda for political discourse and by 1981 their perspective had become commonplace.<sup>3</sup> By the 1980s political scientists were willing to pick up the thread. Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) were the first to acknowledge agenda setting, and Iyengar and Kinder (1987) documented the phenomenon on a national scale. Outright persuasion was still not on the screen, however.<sup>4</sup> This changed with Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987), who showed how the news moved opinion, although not on the time line of campaigns. Jamieson (1992) raised the specter of persuasion inside campaigns, as did Johnston, Blais, Brady,

<sup>2</sup> Where the Berelson et al. (1954) claim is that voters assimilate or contrast candidates' issue positions to resolve tension with their own positions, Conover and Feldman (1989) show that voters assign a candidate to the position typical of the candidate's own party.

<sup>3</sup> As instances, see Funkhouser (1973), McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974), and Weaver (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Mutz (1998) points out, however, that much of what Iyengar and Kinder (and other analysts in the same mode) interpret as agenda-setting was probably persuasion in fact.



and Crête (1992), who found that news and ads affected judgment on party leaders and vote intention.<sup>5</sup>

It is one thing for persuasion to occur, it is another for its effect to be permanent. The electorate, once moved, may typically return to its original position. In a time-series sense, the electorate may be basically “stationary.” It is moveable by an external shock, but without continuing pressure from whatever administered the shock (a stock market collapse in mid-campaign, for example), quasi-autonomic forces undo the initial movement. If such a shock occurs right at the end as an accident of timing, it may turn the electoral tide. But provided shocks occur early enough in the campaign, their effects will be undone. Such an aggregate pattern should prevail if the dominant mode of political cognition among individuals is “memory-based” (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau, 1995).<sup>6</sup> But Lodge and his colleagues argue that the dominant mode of political cognition is not memory-based but “on-line.” On the on-line view, when a shock causes voters to shift their evaluation of a political object, they quickly forget the reason for the reevaluation, they just update and move on. They may shift again but only under the pressure of another shock. If this is indeed the dominant mode of political cognition, then campaign persuasion starts to look very consequential. The Lodge et al. claim is not universally accepted, however, and evidence for it is mainly experimental.<sup>7</sup>

This book provides a direct test. The fact that we identify phases in the 2000 campaign testifies, we argue, to the power of on-line cognition. Particularly impressive is the shift that this section started with: the collapse of perceptions of Al Gore’s character. We show that this is the pivotal event for the entire campaign and that it was induced by an intense, but very short burst of bad news whose effects were permanent. Gore was never able to undo the particular damage, and his recovery came about only because he was able to shift the agenda to another question. But other shocks – some of them remarkable in their initial impact – saw their effects dissipate and so were less consequential.

<sup>5</sup> The heart of the evidence in Johnston et al. (1992) lies in Table 8.6 and Figure 8.10. The effect of their claim may have been limited by being made in the context of a Canadian campaign, not a U.S. one.

<sup>6</sup> This implication is persuasively argued by Wlezien and Erikson (2002).

<sup>7</sup> Chief among the dissenters is Zaller (1992).

Evidently, alternative modes of political cognition coexist. Some voters may have better memories than others. Different modes may be triggered by different events or by different media channels, news versus ads, for instance.

### *News and Ads*

Most of the evidence on the “minimal effects” record involves lack of impact from news. When audience research was in its infancy, so was political advertising as we now understand the term. As well, the minimal effects model could be said to turn on a communications stream that is geographically localized and mediated by personal influence. As such, its relevance may be more historical than current. Personal influence networks are less binding than they once were (Putnam, 2000) and so citizens may have no choice but to look to impersonal sources. Newspaper ownership and market share have consolidated (Mutz, 1998) even as the broadcast media have become the central news source. The media have become more intrusive and citizens may have become less resistant. Accordingly, as Mutz (1998) argues, we have witnessed increasingly pervasive *impersonal* influence, reflecting growth in the collective consciousness of society.<sup>8</sup> Mutz’s own work still concentrates on news, however, and for her the problematic thing is whether the news gets it right. But the changes she documents for mass media also apply to their role as carriers for ads.

The relatively slow rise in emphasis on ads reflects the historical record. The first presidential television ads were played only in 1952. The most controversial early ads – the Johnson campaign’s “Daisy” ad, for instance – postdate most of the “minimal effects” classics in audience research. TV advertising has only recently acquired its current scale and scope, so it should be little surprise that academic research has only begun to catch up. Much of the work is devoted to characterizing the content of ads (Kern, 1989; Jamieson, 1996; West, 1997). As ads are

<sup>8</sup> Mutz sees this as mostly a good thing. She is not persuaded that the massification of influence processes threatens the quality of face-to-face processes, contrary to mass society theorists of the 1950s (Kornhauser, 1959) or their social capital heirs (notably Putnam, 2000). Indeed, she sees impersonal sources as a valuable means of encouraging deliberation, specifically by countering local pressures to conformity (Mutz and Martin, 2001). At the same time, she is sensitive to the fact that news media now carry a bigger burden than before.

even more ephemeral than broadcast news (at least we know when to look for news), merely gauging the volume of plays, much less assessing their impact, is difficult.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest ad impact study with dynamic evidence was of the 1988 Canadian election (Johnston et al., 1992), and that analysis required heroic assumptions. The earliest U.S.-based work was in the laboratory, most tellingly by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995).<sup>10</sup> Ansolabehere and Iyengar also managed to take their laboratory insights to the field. Their contribution has been partly obscured by controversy over their claim that negative ads depress turnout.<sup>11</sup> Ansolabehere and Iyengar also made claims about ads' directional impact, however, and their findings appear to leave the core claim of the older literature strangely intact. They show that although citizens' vote intentions can be shifted, ads are most effective when they work with, rather than against, predisposition.<sup>12</sup> But a major crack in the edifice appeared with Shaw (1999b), who argues with data organized by state and week of campaign that ad volumes make a net difference at the margin. Romer, Jamieson, and Cappella (2000) question Shaw's claim about the magnitude of ad effects but not the fact of their existence.

### *Perceptions of Candidate Traits*

Shaw and Romer, Jamieson, and Cappella aside, most work on ad impact has worked with ad content and has generally focused on messages that clarify means-ends relationships in the domain of issues. The domain in question is inherently *positional*. But campaigns also process valence information. In most political science accounts the valence consideration in question is the economy. But another valence factor also commonly pervades ads: personality traits of the candidates. Honesty (unlike, say, abortion) is something everybody agrees is a good thing. Of course, perception will be biased, as Democratic identifiers typically

<sup>9</sup> Although capturing air time is difficult, political scientists have been studying the impact of ad volumes for some time, almost without realizing it, in studies of spending on Congressional elections.

<sup>10</sup> See also Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) and Biocca (1991).

<sup>11</sup> The controversy is captured by Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt, Kahn and Kenney, Wattenberg and Briens, and Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon in a 1999 exchange in the *American Political Science Review*.

<sup>12</sup> This argument also echoes an early observation by Patterson and McClure (1976) that voters learn more facts about candidates from ads than from news.

see the Democratic candidate in a good light, and so on. But this is just bias, not a position on an issue that actually divides the parties. Presumably, not all trait perception is projective in this sense. Many citizens have no partisan reason to project in the first place and even those who do project may yield to new evidence furnished by the campaign.

Exactly this happened in 2000. The transition between the first and the second phase of the campaign – the undoing of Al Gore – shows how perceptions of candidates' traits are shaped by communication. The most critical shift was in perceptions of Al Gore's honesty. The shift was induced by a rough coincidence of ad and news messages, where Republican ads basically handed a message to TV news. The news in turn undermined perceptions of Gore, a process that was only accelerated by the first debate, which was treated in TV news as a further example of the problems first identified in Republican ads. The fact that ads and news worked together at this point magnified the overall effect.<sup>13</sup> Gore's predicament was somewhat mitigated by the fact that the campaign also worsened perceptions of George W. Bush's basic competence. In the end, voters saw a tradeoff between Bush and Gore. Had the election taken place six weeks earlier, the choice before voters would have seemed simpler.

The factor that produced the shift, perception of Al Gore's personal character, is not commonly seen as a major electoral consideration. The literature on voting and elections takes due notice of candidate traits, to be sure. A multitrait battery is a regular feature of U.S. National Election Study (NES) instrumentation, going back to Kinder, Abelson, and Fiske (1979). (Indeed, a version of the Kinder battery in the Annenberg survey is the basis of our own claims about trait perceptions and effects.) Candidate assessment is a stage in the Miller-Shanks (1996) multistage model that is now the industry standard. But few would argue that personality perceptions are the key to distinguishing elections from each other. Bartels's (2002) recent review suggests that candidate perceptions were, if anything, a smaller factor in 2000 than in other years, although potentially important because

<sup>13</sup> This claim is not quite in the domain occupied by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), who look at the impact of ads-news reinforcement on individuals. Our claims are about content links between the ad and news channels and about aggregate effects of ads and news on perception, opinion, and behavior.

of the closeness of the result. We confirm Bartels in detail – as far as he goes.

What his analysis misses, however, is that perceptions of Gore were the dynamic key to the campaign. What made them dynamically critical is that movement in trait perception tends to be unidirectional. Bias persists, indeed it increases, but no group in the electorate actually grew fonder of Gore as all others were growing less fond. Increase in bias came about only as some groups reevaluated Gore more quickly and more totally than others.

### *Personality and Issues*

In the transition that initiated the third phase and in the third phase itself, the content of communication was about the intersection of issues and traits. Strong party predispositions were engaged and no persuasion occurred contrary to predisposition, exactly as Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) lead us to expect. But not every one was highly predisposed and, overall, opinion moved in one direction at the expense of the other, so the movement was potentially consequential for the bottom line. Gore's recovery occurred against the background of earlier attempts by the Bush campaign to position its candidate close to the center on key dimensions of an agenda traditionally "owned" by the Democrats. By adopting the rhetoric of "compassionate conservatism" and by articulation of Republican alternatives on Democratic issues, Bush may have neutralized some of Gore's natural advantage on education, prescription drugs, and Social Security. Gore certainly acted as if this was the case. And late in the campaign, he found the way to recapture Social Security as a Democratic issue. He spread his message through the debates, through a near-takeover of NBC news, and through ads. He used language that also called George W. Bush's personal trustworthiness into account. At this point, indeed, both sides showed how issue and personality claims can be mutually reinforcing. The Republican attempt to blunt Gore's comeback strategy was executed mainly through ads that challenged Gore's credibility as an interpreter of Bush's Social Security plan. The challenge called up images of personal untrustworthiness: If you can't trust the messenger, you can't trust his message. The attempt succeeded. Where no or few ads were placed, Gore's winning the news battle was the decisive fact.

In closely fought states, where the Bush campaign overwhelmed the airwaves, Gore's news-driven comeback stalled.

### *Ads, News, and Enlightenment*

Was the campaign at bottom an *enlightening* event, in the sense intended by Gelman and King (1993)? That sense is the currently dominant position in the political science literature. It is clearly detectable in Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), for instance. This view freely concedes that campaigns induce real dynamics in vote intention. But these dynamics do not create the result so much as *reveal* it. The critical thing about the campaign is its very existence:

... without it election outcomes would be very different. Moreover, if one candidate were to slack off and not campaign as hard as usual, the campaigns would not be balanced and the election result would likely also change. Thus, under this explanation, presidential election campaigns play a central role in making it possible for voters to become informed so they can make decisions according to the equivalent of enlightened preferences when they get to the voting booth. This process then depends on the media to provide information, which they do throughout the campaign, and the voters to pay attention, which they do disproportionately just before election day. (p. 435)

Campaigns should sharpen the effect of fundamental considerations and move groups with preexisting, basically rational partisan commitments back where they belong. In this sense, then, a campaign reveals enlightened preferences.

The geography of the 2000 election enables us to test the claim for enlightenment with remarkable directness. By the late 1990s, the partisan camps had become evenly balanced and the geographic expression of that balance, quite stable. This stability, combined with the logic of the Electoral College, yielded strong indications of where the campaign actually must be fought. Fewer than half the states in 2000 merited any investment in advertising or in visits by candidates. The spot market in ads accommodated this fact, such that virtually no ads were placed on the networks; almost all were placed with local stations. Each campaign was thus able to place its ads for maximum strategic effect. As a result, a good half the electorate *never* saw an ad (other than as part of a TV news report, at least). Voters who lived in places where ads were aired could see them at the times of the campaign's choosing but

not at others; mainly they could see ads only at the end. The states that attracted ads featured races that were expected to be close. But the 2000 race ended up being close in the country as a whole. So the hard-fought states were a microcosm of the whole electorate. There were a microcosm, that is, except for one particular: *only they got the full campaign "treatment."* This made the campaign potentially a natural experiment.

And at the end, critically, the ad signal became decisively unbalanced, as George W. Bush won the ad war. Movement of vote intention in the direction indicated by mere weight of ads, if the movement did not also occur where no ads played, would by itself call the enlightenment hypothesis in question. Fortuitously, from our point of view, the ad signal outright contradicted the news signal, as Al Gore won the battle of network news. If the dynamics of vote intention where the dominant signal favored Gore – network news by default where no ads could be seen – contradicted the dynamics where the ad signal favored Bush, the enlightenment hypothesis is really in trouble.

Electoral enlightenment can be argued from another perspective that has gained adherents in recent years, the "constructionist" model. This model, first exemplified by Graber (1988) and Gamson (1992), has achieved its fullest flowering in Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West (1996). On this view, campaigns are important mainly as they give the election its *meaning*. The meaning of the event is determined not just by candidates or the mass media, but also through citizens' own active participation. In its emphasis on meaning, this perspective dovetails with earlier work on agenda-setting.

But agenda-setting acquires a critical edge only if it is linked to victory or defeat. Johnston et al. (1992), for instance, brought the agenda-setting perspective squarely back to the center of campaign strategy and showed how one construction of the 1988 Canadian choice served all the major parties better than another, alternative agenda. Johnston et al. showed further that that alternative was a plausible counterfactual. In the 2000 presidential campaign, the agenda moves available to each campaign were hardly straightforward. Should a campaign attempt, in general, to position its candidate relatively close to the center of opinion, or should it reinforce its base? The Republicans certainly seemed to position their candidate toward the center. The Democratic orientation seemed more confused, but then Al Gore faced a more

serious challenge on his left flank than George W. Bush did on his right one.<sup>14</sup> Whatever each side said about itself, it painted the other as extremist, so voters could be forgiven if they felt confused. Were some attractive agenda moves blocked by the structure of preferences or perceptions? Al Gore may have believed this in relation to the economy, out of fear that priming the economy would also prime bad memories of Bill Clinton. Complexities such as these cast a shadow on the imagery in Gelman and King of the rival campaigns' knowing quite unproblematically what cards to play and having the resources to play them.

This is not to deny that campaigns enlighten voters. The 1988 Canadian event cited earlier was at one level a remarkable civic exercise. The parties engaged in intense debate on the core issue, as did many nonparty groups. Extraordinary numbers of private citizens took it upon themselves to read detailed commentaries on the trade agreement; many of them tried to read the agreement itself. *Citizens*, the very persons on whose existence Just et al. insist, populated the landscape. But the event was equally a field for manipulation, in the initial agenda moves and in the subsequent stylization of the stakes. We show that all this could be said of the 2000 presidential campaign as well. Advertising was dense in issue content. Both sides frequently focused on the same question. They did not, *pace* Simon (2002), merely talk past each other, each side emphasizing its own preferred agenda. As the campaign progressed voters saw the stakes more clearly, tightened the links between their issue positions and the vote, but also assimilated their positions on the key issue to their social position or to their general ideological orientation. But both campaigns also engaged in intensely strategic behavior, in resource allocation and in agenda moves. And otherwise identical voters responded differently according to the dominant mass media stimulus where they lived.

<sup>14</sup> Analytic models of elections are no help, as they are all over the map. The standard version of the rational-actor model, originating with Downs (1957), emphasizes centrist strategies. But theorists of that persuasion recognized early that centrist strategies were not all that dominant empirically. This led Aldrich (1983) to weigh party activists in the balance along with casual voters, with noncentrist results. Palfrey (1984) achieved similarly noncentrist results by invoking the specter of invasion from an ideological extreme. Rabinowitz and his colleagues (starting with Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989) argue that the Downs model, which they style as a "proximity" calculus, is flawed at its base as a description of voter psychology. Their alternative, "directional" model argues that centrist strategies almost never make sense.



*Democratic/Republican Asymmetry*

A minor but recurring theme is that Democrats and Republicans differ not just in their substantive policy preferences but also in how they respond to campaign stimuli. Where Bush supporters stood reliably behind the Republican, potential Gore supporters were less steadfast. Gore had to work harder than Bush to hold what, by registration and ideological disposition, “should” have been his base. This may have been an incidental feature of 2000, when Al Gore faced Ralph Nader on his left as well as George W. Bush on his right. But we suspect not. Instead, we show that the asymmetry runs through political cognition: Republicans and Democrats are qualitatively different in how they see candidates’ ideological and issue positions. Cognitive asymmetry was first noticed by Brady and Sniderman (1985) and is a central element in Ansolabhere and Iyengar (1995). These insights, our book shows, have dynamic significance.

*What We Do Not Do*

There is much about the 2000 event that we touch only tangentially. Obviously, an account of the Electoral College and its implications for campaign strategy has lessons for the Florida debacle. No doubt the centrality of Social Security to both the Bush and the Gore campaigns reflects Florida’s voting power (although not just Florida’s). And the story we tell about the pro-Bush imbalance in ads also has special relevance for that state. But this book can do little more than set the Florida story up and show why the state was so pivotal. Besides, other states were also pivotal in 2000. One might ask about New Hampshire, for instance, whose four Electoral votes would have put Al Gore over the top, whatever happened in Florida.

Mention of both Florida and New Hampshire points to another facet of 2000 that we treat only in passing: the Nader campaign. Worry about Nader was visibly reflected in various aspects of the Gore campaign’s strategy. In our multivariate estimations, we contrast Gore and Bush separately as alternatives to “neither of the above.” Most respondents in our survey who rejected both Bush and Gore had no candidate preference at all, as far as we could tell. But a critical fraction whom we classified this way actively preferred Ralph Nader. Rarely do we single them out, however, as in a study focused on dynamics, the Nader candidacy must be a sideshow. Our own data did not reveal interesting

dynamics in third-party vote intention. We admit that our concentration on strategic choices by and on the balance of forces affecting the two main candidates neglects key elements in a comprehensive account of the 2000 result. But our goal was never to account for all the particulars, but rather to use the 2000 event to shed light on the dynamics of election, whatever the year.

### **Data and Analyses**

The most important data source for this book is the National Continuous Monitor component of the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). The Monitor was in the field almost continuously from November 1999 to January 2001, but we look at the period of highest sampling density, July to Election Day, when roughly three hundred completed interviews were completed each day. Apart from sheer scale, the distinctive feature of the Monitor is its manner of release to the field. The survey is a “rolling cross-section,” managed so that the day on which a respondent happens to be interviewed is as much a product of random selection as that respondent’s initial presence in the sample. All that distinguishes one day’s sample from another day’s, aside from sampling error, is something that has happened in the interval. Over-time comparison is possible with few or no controls, and the sample can be partitioned pretty much at will. Details on the sample and the design can be found in Romer, Kenski, Waldman, Adasiewicz, and Jamieson (2004).

Supplementing the survey data and occasionally wedded to them are data about advertising. The primary source of ad data is the Campaign Media Analysis Group, or CMAG. CMAG data for 2000 cover the seventy-five largest media markets, where 74.1 percent of the NAES Monitor sample lives. This remarkable data source covers campaign advertising by both official campaigns and by independent groups aligned with the candidates. It also permits detailed content analysis, a recurring feature of this book.<sup>15</sup> Supplementing CMAG for certain purposes are the weekly advertising buys from each candidate’s campaign. These give complete coverage of the nation and they represent

<sup>15</sup> The first published use of CMAG data is Freedman and Goldstein (1999).

the likelihood that ads will actually be seen. But they are limited to the official campaigns and do not permit analysis of content.

The Annenberg 2000 study also included detailed content analysis of news coverage. In this book, news coverage basically means the three national networks. Notwithstanding the proliferation of cable, networks remain the primary means of access to the campaign for ordinary television viewers. Approximately one household in four still does not have cable connections and cannot see any of the cable channels. Also cable news channels, unlike networks, do not concentrate their hard news coverage in a single part of the viewing day.

## The Book

The first two chapters present the ultimate dependent variable – vote intention – and the ultimate independent variables – temporally constant factors in social structure, partisanship, and ideology.

*Chapter 2* makes the case for division of the general campaign into three basic phases: Gore ahead, Bush ahead, Gore drawing even. The transition between the first and second phase was especially abrupt. The chapter also documents other shifts, none of which seemed to endure, and argues that these shifts are overlays on the two basic ones. The basic shifts endured, and the pattern that defined the first two phases was stronger at the end of each phase than at any earlier point in it. Until the very end, movement in Gore's share was mirrored by movement in Bush's share only incompletely. Gore-preference also traded off with no-preference. The major candidates' preference profiles were, in short, asymmetric: Bush forces were disciplined, neither gaining nor losing much; Gore forces were more fickle, potentially more numerous but difficult to hold in line. Finally, the overall amplitude of swings may have diminished over the course of the campaign, although the evidence for this is ambiguous.

This diminution in swing, such as it was, points to increasing polarization. Polarization with respect to what? *Chapter 3* considers the possibility that polarization was mainly toward fixed fundamentals: social structure, party identification, and ideology. If such polarization occurs, a critical question is the balance among considerations. Balance does seem to be the governing motif. The key social structural elements are offsetting in the sense that the one-sided groups tend also to be

small. Party identification is arguably not as one-sidedly Democratic as it is commonly thought to be. Conservatives clearly outnumber liberals, so this dimension helps the Republicans. But moderates were far more likely to vote Democrat than Republican, so this dimension too nets out to a rough balance. The dynamic asymmetry flagged in Chapter 2 reflects a structural one described here: George W. Bush was more of a fixed object than Gore, more a focus of attraction or repulsion. Focus on fundamentals includes the geography of the system. Independently of state-by-state differences in social, partisan, and ideological composition there are enduring state partisan cultures. As a result, the 2000 state-by-state vote distribution was quite predictable from 1996 returns, and a core of highly competitive states can be identified. For all that fundamentals do a good job of assigning respondents to sides, the campaign did *not* increase polarization much with respect to fundamentals. The ebb and flow of preference largely cut through precommitted groups. Not all respondents could be assigned to such a group. The polarization identified in Chapter 2 was oriented to other considerations, and is a matter for further investigation in later chapters.

So Chapters 2 and 3 leave unanswered questions. Although abiding “fundamentals” account for much of the vote in a cross-sectional sense, they account for remarkably little of its dynamics. Instead, analysis of the ground for campaigning points toward a handful of states on which the rival campaigns were likely to concentrate. This geographic indication takes us into the realm of strategy, and the chapters that follow look at critical choices by the campaigns, as well as how the campaigns were received by the mass media and by voters.

Because of the interaction of geography and the electoral college, the campaign took the form of a natural experiment. If Chapter 3 identified the landscape over which the battle must take place, *Chapter 4* describes how strategic actors responded to the landscape and with what impact. Visits and ads were highly concentrated geographically. Ads in particular were focused on only a handful of states, and the identity of these states was highly predictable from analysis in Chapter 3. In general, within a state, if the campaigns advertised anywhere they advertised everywhere. The volume of ads ramped up dramatically at the very end of the campaign.

Over the full campaign, the Republicans bought somewhat more ads than the Democrats. Independent advertising offset this partially, and

the overall Republican advantage was modest. But pro-Bush ads were markedly more concentrated than pro-Gore ones in the last days of the campaign. In the last week, the Bush advantage was nearly two-to-one. This advantage mattered to the outcome, as the advertising differential for any week affected candidate choice at the margin. Specifically, it affected choice of Al Gore, a further indication of the greater volatility of his proto-coalition. In closely fought states, Gore might have netted four percentage points more of the popular vote among persons with weak partisan commitments had he been able to match Republican ad spending. Partly offsetting this was that Al Gore won the news war at the end. The campaign thus was fought in two, divergent arenas. The three-phase chronology of Chapter 2 reflected the campaign in the free media and was mainly a story of low-volume, uncompetitive states. Where advertising was heavy – which at the end is to say, where pro-Bush advertising was especially heavy – the third phase was aborted, and Al Gore did not recover.

The next three chapters capture the content of the campaign, in its rhetorical focus and in the substance of voter response. Roughly speaking, each chapter accounts for a phase.

*Chapter 5* suggests that the first phase exhibited characteristics predicted by econometric forecasting models. The nominating conventions sorted out citizens' perceptions in ways that were useful for Al Gore. In general, respondents saw the economy in a far more positive light than at practically any time in recent memory and they were willing to credit the Clinton-Gore administration with primary responsibility for this. In September, economic perceptions yielded the Gore campaign a net advantage. But after the convention Gore failed to take credit for the economy; his campaign ads mentioned it not once. As September yielded to October, the link of economic perception to the vote attenuated. By indirection, this confirms the intuition of earlier observers that campaigns prime the economy, indeed that they produce the very link that drives forecasting models. The 2000 campaign is the exception that proves the rule. Instead the ultimately dominant aspect of the Clinton-Gore stewardship was Bill Clinton's low personal reputation, which made him a drag on the Democratic ticket. Certainly, notwithstanding the economy and the president's high professional regard, Republican advertising did not hesitate to link Gore to Clinton. Tellingly, Gore himself never made the link.

*Chapter 6* shows that the transition to the second phase was driven by judgments on the current candidates. Before mid-September respondents struggled to differentiate aspects of candidates' personalities; ostensible judgment on individual facets of character mainly reflected overall popularity. In late September, however, the candidates – Gore in particular – came into sharper focus, as did the personality tradeoff between Bush and Gore. If Al Gore seemed generally more competent, Bush seemed the more estimable character. At the end, the competing considerations were almost perfectly balanced. But *dynamically*, the critical fact was the permanent collapse in judgments on Gore's character, on his honesty in particular. This collapse defined the transition and permanently worsened the terms of the electoral equation for Gore. His recovery occurred in spite of this worsening. The collapse was induced by a firestorm of media controversy in late September, a peculiar concentration of stories that seemed to exemplify long-standing but as yet unprimed suspicions about Gore. If TV news was the conduit for these suspicions, the language in which they were voiced was handed to the media by the Republican campaign.

*Chapter 7* shows that Al Gore closed the gap mainly by focusing on George W. Bush's proposal to divert some Social Security contributions into the stock market. On most questions that might have featured in the 2000 campaign – many actually did – Gore was aligned with popular majorities (Waldman and Jamieson, 2003). But two obvious exceptions, abolishing inheritance taxes and the Bush stock market plan, were central planks on the Republican platform. Gore attacked the Social Security proposal. As a result, in debates, ads, and news, the campaign was a site for learning on policy questions, notwithstanding the persistence of cognitive bias. Initially, however, Gore's attacks only clarified that he was further from the center of opinion than his opponent. Ultimately, these attacks began to move opinion, such that although a majority supported Bush's position right to the end, the balance clearly shifted toward Gore. And this shifting balance accounted for much of Gore's ultimate recovery. But the recovery was incomplete in states pivotal to the Electoral College for reasons first outlined in Chapter 4. As Gore increased his focus on Bush's Social Security proposals, the Republican advertising effort responded in kind. At the end, 80 percent of Republican ads mentioned Social Security, usually also impugning Gore's credibility as an opponent of the Bush plan. In places

where Republican ads dominated, initial opinion shifts toward Gore's position were reversed. Once again, we see the divergence between arenas that operated to Gore's strategic disadvantage.

*Chapter 8* accounts for the track record of claims about campaign effects. At some level, most propositions about campaigns, both claims that minimize the independent significance of campaigns and claims that take them seriously as forces in history, prove to be true. Some dynamics of the 2000 campaign seemed quite predictable. But others were not. Resources were not balanced at the end and the imbalance mattered to the result. Al Gore did not grasp an issue that predictive models said he would have. His failure to do so probably reflected a predicament that forecasting models have never acknowledged. The predicament took a particular form in 2000, but it suggests a more general pattern: At least one candidate, sometimes both, face strategic tradeoffs. Not all issues are positional, and movement in position or perception a "valence" domain like candidate personality can cut through predispositions efficiently. Not all citizens have strong predispositions on policy. If such voters cannot be anchored to, say, a clear view of appropriate reward or punishment for managing the economy, then it all may come down to which side buys the most ads in the last week.