# Communication in U.S. Elections

## New Agendas

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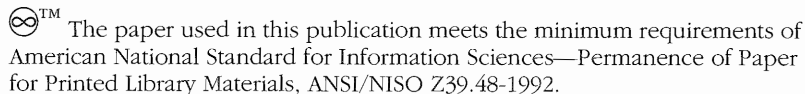

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In memory of
Annette Greenfield Strauss
Public servant, philanthropist, humanitarian

# 1

# Communicating and Electing

*Daron R. Shaw*

In July 2000, I sat in on an afternoon session of a rolling two-day meeting of George W. Bush's "E-Campaign" team. Many things were heating up in Austin at the time, not the least of which was the campaign. The Bush team was three weeks away from launching its revamped Web site. In five weeks they would go to Philadelphia for the GOP convention, during which time the E-Plan would have to be articulated to Republican officials and sympathetic members of the high-tech community.

The meeting's previous conversations had ranged over a number of topics. How should the campaign use the Web site to coordinate the activities of state and county campaign officials? How could the campaign use the thousands of email addresses they had already gathered to disseminate information? How might they acquire and use additional addresses? What could be done to facilitate better communication with the so-called second-tier press writing for political Web sites? How could the campaign respond to rumors about Bush that spread like a virus through email?

Amid all these questions, a single exchange caught my attention. Price Roe, a razor-sharp twenty-two-year-old, was making the case that the new Web site ought to drop cookies on all visitors. Cookies are electronic fingerprints that allow the proprietors of a site to track subsequent Web-surfing patterns of site visitors. The Bush site had not used cookies before that point. E-Campaign Chair Bill Rice expressed concern that if this were divulged during the fall, it could embarrass the campaign. Roe persisted, somewhat incredulous that any site interested in amassing information about its customer base would not drop cookies. Roe pointed out that no one with an ounce of understanding of the Web would be surprised that the campaign's site was like every other site. Rice argued that the issue wasn't whether media reports

on "privacy questions" surrounding Bush's site were justified. The issue, rather, was whether they would cost the campaign a valuable news cycle that would otherwise focus on Bush's message.

In the end, the campaign decided to use cookies, although the site offered prominent privacy statements, did not seek to use its information to identify individuals, and used an "opt-in" gateway before getting any information from the cookie. The decision was made somewhat easier by virtue of the fact that the competition was already doing just that. Al Gore's site included a warning that they would drop cookies at some later time during the campaign. The Bush decision was also influenced by the fact that any privacy issues regarding the Web site were likely to be pointed out soon after the launch. Sure enough, the Reuters news service ran a story questioning privacy guarantees of visitors to the Bush site. The story hit the wires only four hours after the revamped site was unveiled.

I saw the 1992 presidential campaign up close, and these two days eight years later were astonishing to me. The Web and email were in their infancy in 1992. Even at that time, email was greatly enhancing the ability of top-level campaign officials to communicate with one another, but there was little effort to cultivate lists of email addresses or to explore the viral possibilities of message dissemination. As for the Internet, having a Web site was considered cutting edge. Actually maintaining it and incorporating it into a broader communicative strategy was a pipe dream. Figuring I could milk stories from the 1992 race until at least 2004, I was taken aback by how soon my understanding of modern campaign communication had become obsolete. By the standards of 1992, the 2000 campaign was a whole new ballgame.

For students of political communication, the New Agendas conference in Austin presented both challenges and opportunities. The challenges were obvious. In the broadest sense, what is the received wisdom on politics and the media? Are theories of political communication dynamic enough to explain how voters and campaigns interact in contemporary elections? How can these theories be adapted to new developments, new techniques?

And while computers are now a big part of the campaign story, our challenges in the area of political communication are not confined merely to the rise of the personal computer. One also finds the proliferation of cable television and cable networks, as well as the continued penetration of telephones. Perhaps more importantly, there have been parallel changes in how Americans think and act toward each other and toward politics. Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone* (2000) describes the breakdown of community and group activity that defined American social life a half century ago. Putnam cites the rise of television as the main culprit, but he assiduously and empirically documents how atomistic Americans have become in addition. The ascendance of a culture in which communication is more passive, isolated, and dispersed cannot help but affect politics. Yet we have only begun to consider how these changes affect us as citizens and as voters.



The opportunities evident at the New Agenda conference are only slightly less apparent. Where and how voters get their information have always been interesting to people who write and think about politics. Election dynamics are becoming a particularly trenchant subject, as democratization continues throughout Eastern Europe and the Americas. Political communication scholars in the United States are thus in the spotlight as an international audience looks for insights garnered about modern, media-driven campaigns. The United States is not an old nation in most ways, but when it comes to electronic campaigning it is positively ancient.

While some in the field of political science contend that the United States is still an exceptional case, I believe it is increasingly likely that American campaigns will become the template for democratic elections throughout the world. Prominent examples of this influence abound. Look at the gleeful symbiosis, for example, between the Clintonites and Tony Blair's Labor campaigns in Great Britain. Or consider the more personal, but nonetheless significant, role James Carville played in Ehud Barak's bid to unseat Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel in 1999. Or more generally, what about the plethora of American consultants in the recent Russian and Mexican elections? In my view, these are harbingers of campaigns to come. Scholars in the United States, then, have a special opportunity, and a special obligation, to get the story of political communication right because what began here is moving elsewhere rapidly.

This book takes aim at these challenges and opportunities. Its chapters contain the thoughts and preliminary research of a handful of talented young scholars. While more established researchers continue to offer insight and context as the nation barrels down the information superhighway, it is the young guard of academia who will assess the great leap forward these marvels of communication present.

Before turning to their work, some context is useful. In particular, the remainder of this chapter delineates a bit of what we know about political campaign communication, discusses some of the recent changes in the area, presents five research nodes that structure this volume, and then considers the common themes and further issues apparent in some of the empirical chapters.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION

### The Old Classics

The traditional starting point for almost any treatment of American political communication is the groundbreaking research of Paul Lazarsfeld and his

Columbia University colleagues in the 1940s. The story is, by now, old hat: Interviews with real voters during the election campaigns of 1944 and 1948 contradicted the presumption that Americans were attentive to and informed about politics. The result was a shift in scholars' notions of the public opinion paradigm. Rather than the image of informed, attentive voters conjured up by the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and the watercolors of Norman Rockwell, the data told us that voters were largely unengaged and uninformed, didn't think or talk much about politics and, when they did, they were passive participants in community-wide information networks dominated by a handful of elites.

This sociological model of voting was challenged by the social psychologists of the Michigan school a few years later. Pointing out that there was little psychological explanation for the reality described by the Columbia scholars, the Michigan researchers used national survey data to develop a model of voting driven by party identification. Again, voters were found to be inattentive and unknowledgeable. In the seminal book *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), the focus shifted from group-based models of communication to individual-level explanations of information acquisition and processing. Most notably, the social psychologists argued that voters develop attachments to one or the other political party early in life and rely on this predisposition to structure political reality and serve as a perceptual screen. The "funnel of causality" became the ultimate expression of both arguments.

For both the Columbia and Michigan schools, political communication was thought to have the potential to persuade and mobilize voters. This simple fact has often been overlooked or ignored by subsequent scholarship. It is true that Lazarsfeld and his colleagues were a bit vague in specifying the dynamic driving group elites and attentive opinion leaders to acquire information. There is, however, nothing deterministic in their account of information flow during the 1948 election. In *Voting* (Campbell et al. 1960), groups were found to have often preferred one party to the other, but these tendencies were erratic. Furthermore, contrary and persuasive information was found to work its way into the communities and to affect the ultimate distribution of the vote.

In fact, there are several specific and pointed examples in *Voting* of the authors' belief that political communication matters. For example, in their discussion of political effects, Berelson et al. (1954) wrote, "It seems clear that an impending defeat for the Democratic Party was staved off by a refocusing of attention on the socio-economic concerns which had originally played such a large role in building that party's majority in the 1930s" (270). In detailing the susceptibility of voters to political information, they argued, "The individual voter may not have a great deal of detailed information, but he has picked up the crucial general information as part of the social learning itself. . . . He cannot live in an American community without knowing broadly where political parties stand" (320).



For the Michigan scholars, party identification was viewed as a powerful but not omnipotent explanatory variable. In fact, the authors of *The American Voter* explicitly acknowledged that factors besides party identification influenced the electoral decision. Campbell et al. tell us that even though "the distribution of party identification in that year favored Democrats by about 3 to 2. . . . We know that the actual components of the 1952 vote were more pro-Republican than pro-Democrat" (529). Indeed, since *The American Voter* drew on data from the 1950s—during which the minority party won both presidential elections—it is not too surprising that the potential for persuasion was acknowledged. Consider too the funnel of causality. At the top of the funnel is party identification, which acts as a perceptual screen, limiting the volume and content of information available to a given voter, but the inputs to the funnel are powerfully driven by political contexts. In short, elections and campaigns matter.

This line of reasoning is expanded by one of the principal figures of the Michigan school, Philip Converse. In "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964), Converse presented evidence that voters' opinions are inconsistent (across time and issue domains), and that they have low levels of ideological clarity. For our purposes, it is this second argument that merits closer attention. Converse observed that voters rarely used ideological language ("liberal" or "conservative") to describe their politics. They are more apt to refer to party identification or "the nature of the times" when rationalizing their preferences. In other words, opinions and preferences are greatly influenced by economic and social conditions, as well as (presumably) the manner in which the candidates and the media frame those conditions.

## The New Classics

Even though the Columbia and Michigan scholarship leave room for campaign and election effects, the prominence of more predictable variables in their analyses leads to many questions. Most of these questions have centered on whether and how voters use information provided by campaigns. In *The Responsible Electorate*, V. O. Key (1966) contended that voters (in his famous phrase) "are not fools" and that campaign communication can matter. He suggested that while voters are not especially well informed about issue or policy particulars, they managed to use the campaign to get a broad sense of how things are going. This sense allowed voters to act as "rational gods" of reward and punishment.

Fiorina expanded Key's conception of voter rationality in *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (1981). Fiorina argued that simple retrospective evaluations about the condition of the country were critical for

voters' preferences in a given election. More importantly, he detailed the interactive and dynamic relationship between these evaluations and more durable attitudes (such as party identification). Fiorina was also much less sanguine than Key about the notion that these individual-level processes facilitated aggregate-level democratic accountability. Fiorina posited that parties have weakened and that institutions have changed such that the system's ability to foster accountability is very much in doubt.

Popkin elaborated on Fiorina's premise in *The Reasoning Voter* (1991). Going further than either Fiorina or Key, Popkin argued that voters not only use summary judgments about the condition of the country to decide their ballot but they also use pieces of seemingly innocuous information to engage in "gut-level" reasoning. Political communication, therefore, matters—even when it is something as seemingly trivial as Dan Quayle misspelling "potato" or Gerald Ford trying to eat an unshucked tamale. Much of Popkin's conceptualization drew on the pathbreaking work on "heuristics" and "cues" done by psycholinguists such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in the 1970s.

The role of information and rationality is not the only controversial aspect to the established understanding of political communication. Social psychologists Nie, Verba, and Petrocik also focused their attention on the role of political context. In *The Changing American Voter* (1976), they presented data on the heightened issue awareness among voters in the 1960s and early 1970s, a time when politics "mattered." On a different front, Achen (1975) offered a powerful broadside against *The American Voter*, emphasizing changes in survey research methodology made since the early 1960s. Neither Achen nor Nie et al. claimed that the Michigan school precludes the possibility of persuasive communicative effects.

Other scholars looked to fashion a more sophisticated understanding of how political communication operates. Some focused on how the news media affect elections and voters. McCombs and Shaw (1972), for example, offered a theory of agenda setting, arguing that the media influence not what voters think, but what they think about. McCombs later expanded his theoretical construct to encompass "second-level" agenda setting, in which *candidates* were also linked to issue agendas. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) delineated the phenomenon of "priming," by which the media provided the context and criteria that voters then used to evaluate issues and candidates. In his more recent research, Iyengar (1991) contended that the media further influenced voters and politics through their "framing" of issues. He added, however, that the media often wasted their potential influence by using narrow, "episodic" frames as opposed to broader, "thematic" frames.

A smattering of content analytic studies show that the news media's professional dynamics can have somewhat perverse effects on elections and voting. For example, several studies find that the media emphasize the strategies and poll standings of the candidates—the "horse race" (Capella and Jamieson 1997; Just et al. 1996; Kerbel 1995; Lichter and Noyes 1995; Patterson 1993; Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Sabato 1991). Many of these same studies argued that the media favor negative stories—scandals, gaffes, and other manifestations of "gotcha" journalism (Capella and Jamieson 1997; Just et al. 1996; Kerbel 1995; Lichter and Noyes 1995; Patterson 1993; Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Sabato 1991). Both of these trends are presumed to have deleterious effects on voters' attitudes toward the political system.



Others scholars focused on how voters process information presented by the news media and the candidates. Memory-based processing, for example, assumes that voters' minds are like storage bins, with voters searching these bins for relevant considerations when they respond to a pollster or cast a vote. Zaller (1992) largely relied on a memory-based understanding of information processing in his analysis of public opinion dynamics. He wrote:

> The effect of persuasive communication depends on the other ideas already present in a person's mind and on the opposing ideas to which the individual may be concurrently exposed. This makes resistance to a political campaign, where a campaign normally consists of a dominant campaign (or message) and a countervalent campaign, a rather complicated phenomenon. If a person has a large internal mass of stored information, or exposure to countervalent information sources, no simple piece of information from a dominant campaign is likely to have much effect. But if a person has little prior information and little access to alternative communication flows, information reaching him from a dominant campaign will have a large effect. (266)

In other words, Zaller argued that the nature of the elite debate and the sophistication of recipients mitigate the effects of political communication. Most notably, Zaller said that mildly sophisticated voters are the most likely to move in response to political messages. Highly sophisticated voters, in contrast, are less susceptible because they are more likely to be partisan and selective about the information they choose to accept. Low-sophistication voters are also less susceptible because they are unlikely to be exposed to the message in the first place. Shifts in opinion among these groups therefore occur only when (1) there is a breakdown in the consensus among party elites so that highly sophisticated voters receive contradictory messages, or (2) the political debate becomes sufficiently intense to reach middle- or even low-sophistication voters.

In an important challenge to the standard conception of information processing, Milton Lodge (1995a) championed the idea that voters process political information "on-line." That is, when voters access and accept new information, they use it to update their prior perception or opinion on an issue or candidate. This new "prior" then becomes the baseline against which all subsequent information acts. This process borrows from Bayesian inference

and has sparked a debate about the extent to which voters engage in on-line versus memory-based processing. The debate rages on, although recent experimental studies suggest that voters use different strategies for different contexts.

Recent studies have also examined the role of informational ambiguity in elections. Put another way, we know a good deal about how candidates communicate their issue positions, but little about how positional clarity affects opinions and votes. Several major analyses have considered ambiguity in the past few years, most notably Alvarez's *Issues and Information in Presidential Elections* (1997), which summarized much of the existing literature and then made the case for the strong influence of ambiguity on preference consistency, volatility, and extremity.

Similarly, Bartels addressed ambiguity in three separate works. In *Presidential Primaries* (1988), Bartels identified three effects of uncertainty. First, he argued that knowledge is a necessary condition for supporting a candidate—voters don't support someone if they don't know anything about him or her. Second, even if voters know a little bit about a candidate, Bartels said that they prefer known quantities to less well-known quantities. Third, he contended that the levels of information available to the public influence the process of evaluation. If voters know a good deal about the candidates, their appraisals tend to be more substantive. Bartels also pointed out that learning does occur during primary campaigns. Ironically, however, he observed that information is *least* available when it would be most valuable: when a "momentum" candidate suddenly breaks through. Bartels tells us that horse-race information fills this vacuum and is thus a critical part of the momentum process.

In addition to his famous study of primaries, Bartels (1986, 1996) also examined the effects of information and ambiguity on general election voters. In his 1996 article, he estimated what their preferences would look like under conditions of full information. In doing so, Bartels offered a different take on the James Fishkin–led (1995) debate about the effects of political deliberation. Bartels is something of a moderate in this controversy, though. He found that information *does* change the structure of elections and opinionation, although not as much as one might think.

A final area of recent research deals with the general topic of campaign effects. Gelman and King (1993) have become a touchstone for this literature with their analysis of movement in the preelection candidate preference polls. After considering a number of explanations for this movement, they concluded that presidential campaigns affect elections by activating the latent preferences of voters. These latent preferences, they argued, are a function of the state of the economy and general approval of incumbent performance. Holbrook (1996) identified significant effects associated with certain presidential campaign events, but concluded that these tend to "matter" only in close elections. Other scholars, most notably Finkel (1993), are even more skeptical about presidential campaign effects. Studies of congressional campaigns, on the other hand, tend to presume such effects: Most detail the importance of money, which can be taken as a surrogate for campaigning. The debate about campaign effects remains, however. The only point of unanimity across these works is that we have a long way to go before we can operationalize and estimate the import of campaigning in a comprehensive and meaningful way.



In sum, the seminal works of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s told us that the electorate was not sufficiently attentive to politics to be greatly moved by communication. These works did not, however, suggest that any movement was impossible or that campaigns did not influence elections. The research of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s focuses on reestimating campaign and media effects, looking to specify conditional or interactive relationships, and expanding our conception of how people use and acquire political information.

## CHANGES IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

But if we are making progress toward a more subtle and nuanced understanding of how citizens acquire and use political information, are we also keeping up with changes that might alter these relationships? Absent a crystal ball, we can only guess. It seems, however, that technology is moving faster than our ability to react to it.

A first step toward figuring how far we are behind the curve is to be a bit more precise about how political communication has changed since, say, 1990. A simple way of structuring such a discussion is to think in terms of outlets, access, and receptivity. "Outlet" refers to various media and other sources of political information. The questions here are fairly obvious. Is television still dominant or has the Internet become a viable challenger? How has cable television altered the volume and pattern of news consumption? And what of newspapers, magazines, and radio?

The proliferation of political information outlets is undeniable. In 1992, CNN was the only cable news network. In 2000, one found CNN, CNN Headline News, CNBC, C-SPAN, MSNBC, and FOX News. In 1992, the only TV magazines were *60 Minutes* and *20/20*. In 2000, *20/20* ran twice a week and *60 Minutes* spawned *60 Minutes II*. There is also *48 Hours*, which ran more than once a week. Throw in the stalwart *Nightline* and the comedic *Politically Incorrect*, and one is confronted with a smorgasbord of offerings.

On-line, there has been an enormous expansion in the number and variety of political Web sites. In chapter 11 of this book, Robert Klotz estimates that approximately 70 percent of the candidates now running for federal office have Web sites. The Republican and Democratic national, senate, and

congressional parties all have Web sites, as does a vast majority of state parties. All major news services—ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, Fox, Reuters, AP, and Bloomberg—offer political Web sites as well. So do the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and a host of other elite and regional newspapers. There are also dozens of nonpartisan or independent web sites, such as Project Vote Smart and Open Secrets (both of which provide campaign finance information), the Polling Report, Gallup, and the Roper Center (which offer polling data), as well as government sites, such as the Federal Election Commission.

In contrast, radio, newspapers, and magazines have been relatively quiet over the past decade. Even here, though, we have seen the emergence of Dr. Laura Schlesinger as a force in talk radio and John Kennedy Jr.'s founding of the pop-politics magazine *George*. Furthermore, the emergence of Rush Limbaugh's syndicated talk show and the national newspaper *USA Today* in the late 1980s have had a lingering impact on the style and substance of political information.

The broad point to be made here is almost self-evident: There are many more outlets for political information today than in 1990. There is also much more competition for voters' attention, as "niche" entertainment has been raised to an art form by the Internet and cable/satellite television.

This point leads to the second subject in our brief overview of changes in political communication: "Access"—the public's willingness to seek out political information. Put plainly, are Americans taking advantage of the dizzying array of cable news outlets and political news web sites? Or are higher levels of mistrust and cynicism causing voters to tune out?

Several articles of faith dominate our present understanding of how (and how often) the public acquires political information. We assume that the acquisition of political information is limited and that it tends to occur late in the general election campaign cycle. When it does occur, television is still assumed to be the 800-pound gorilla of dissemination. There is, however, more diversity within television news. Moreover, the "new media" are mounting challenges, as millions of Americans either are on-line or soon will be. In addition, newspapers, magazines, and radio are becoming less important. Are the old articles of faith still valid?

The truth is that we really do not know. Surely there have been stunning changes in how we communicate over the past decade, but the particulars of these changes have not been particularly well delineated by political communication scholars. Let us see what progress can be made with a few basic facts.

According to a January 2000 national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 62 percent the American people say they watch television on a given day; 52 percent go on-line, access the Internet, or use email; 47 percent read a newspaper; and 44 percent listen to radio. In other words, television is still the dominant venue for accessing information, but the PC has passed all other outlets.



Furthermore, the gap between TV and the PC is closing fast. The Pew data estimate that 68 percent of Americans use a computer on a daily basis today. The 52 percent who go on-line daily represent a twenty-point jump over the 32 percent who did so in 1995. Conversely, traditional television outlets are not being accessed as often as they were only seven years earlier. Regular consumption of local television news was down from 77 percent in 1993 to 56 percent in 2000. Similarly, regular viewership of nightly network news is down from 60 percent to 31 percent. Viewership of TV magazine shows declined from 52 percent to 30 percent.

The Pew survey also shows that even cable television audiences have been of uneven size since the mid-1990s. For example, CNN's regular viewership went from 35 percent in 1993 to 21 percent in 2000. C-Span dipped from 11 percent to 4 percent in 1998, bouncing back up to 11 percent in 2000. Fox News and CNBC have stabilized at 17 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

In short, the sheer volume and diversity of entry points make it difficult to track absolute levels of voter access. Put another way, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which Americans acquire political information given the multitude of outlets and the treacherous problems associated with recall measures of usage. It is probably the case that information is being accessed more than ever before. It is also likely that systematic biases affect who is accessing this information.

The third subject worthy of consideration is "receptivity"—the public's willingness to update their beliefs and opinions based on information they receive. People must have access to political information for it to have an effect. Merely encountering information is no guarantee, however, that a voter will find it credible and alter his or her opinion accordingly.

If access is a slippery concept to quantify, receptivity is even more so. What data we have suggest contrary trends. On the one hand, greater numbers of independents and weakening partisanship (Wattenberg 1990, 1991) indicate higher receptivity. The logic here is simple: People who strongly identify with Democrats or Republicans are suspicious of information coming from "the other side." It stands to reason that fewer strong identifiers make for less aggregate resistance to information from the outside.

On the other hand, greater levels of mistrust and cynicism indicate lower receptivity. If voters believe that government and politics are corrupt and/or incompetent, they are prone to disbelieve information originating from these sources. The data here are becoming convincing. Capella and Jamieson (1997) documents decreased levels of trust and increased cynicism over the 1990s, attributing both to the media's coverage of politics and campaigns. Hetherington (1998, 1999) demonstrates the public's growing mistrust of government and he shows how this can affect broader political attitudes and behaviors.

The core problem, then, is that we have not identified a measure or specified a model of receptivity. This leads to speculative theorizing, which, in turn, produces the aforementioned interesting (but contradictory) hypotheses. This confusion distinguishes receptivity from outlets and access, both of which are presumed to have increased since 1990. Conversely, these three subjects are linked together by the fact that they have all clearly changed over this interval. The scope, magnitude, and consequences of change are, however, far less clear.

## THINKING ABOUT NEW AGENDAS

Given the recent changes in political communication, the authors in this volume pursue two tasks. First, they attempt to identify subject areas that are vital to students of politics and to citizens of a democracy, especially where there is a relative paucity of theoretical insight and empirical research at the current time. Second, they attempt to use existing theory and knowledge to understand problems of political communication likely to affect us at the dawn of a new millennium. The chapters in this book can be grouped into five broad nodes.

### Informing the Modern Electorate

The two chapters in this section tackle the role of information and political discussion in the most recent election campaigns. In chapter 2, Dietram Scheufele harkens back to the themes of the Columbia school in his examination of how political talk affects voters. Scheufele does so by integrating a theoretical and empirical understanding of interpersonal communication with the well-trodden framework of media effects. In particular, he argues that interpersonal communication after exposure to media coverage both mobilizes *and* polarizes the electorate. In so doing, Scheufele touches not only on the classic arguments of Berelson et al. but also on the recent research on TV advertising effects by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) and Finkel and Geer (1998).

In chapter 3, Scott Althaus expands on the influential recent work of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and Bartels (1996) by considering how congressional election outcomes across the 1990s might have differed if the electorate had been "fully informed." In this way, Althaus joins a burgeoning and important debate on deliberation and its effects (see Fishkin 1995). Althaus's analysis differs from previous studies (most notably Bartels's) by imputing informed preferences for nonvoters as well as voters. Althaus corroborates recent findings that candidate preferences are influenced by information, although he also shows that a variety of political factors condition the nature and magnitude of these influences.



### Media Frames in Contemporary Campaigns

Chapters by Dhavan Shah and Adam Simon extend and reconsider (respectively) the literature on framing effects in election campaigns. In chapter 4, Shah pushes the framing paradigm in a new direction: How do certain kinds of news media frames affect voters' information processing, preferences, and behavior? More specifically, do media frames emphasizing "values" or "rights" or "morals" lead to the employment of compensatory (versus noncompensatory) decisions? Using a pilot survey, he finds that value frames strongly influence issue interpretations but that they tend to have a weaker influence on turnout and voting. Shah also questions the normative bias against "rights talk" implicit in other preliminary analyses.

Simon's chapter 5 asks a question that unnerves professors who teach the introductory course on political communication each semester: What do we mean by "framing"? Simon correctly points to the different conceptions floating about the field, organizing these distinct perspectives in interesting and novel ways. More importantly, he offers an innovative "rational choice" perspective on framing and priming that sheds light on important differences between those phenomena. Simon also proposes using computer-based analysis to examine speech and media texts in order to assess frames that may strongly affect public policy formation that cannot be easily described via traditional content analysis.

### Interpersonal Judgments and Electoral Outcomes

At the heart of political communication is the way voters see candidates and their government. One of the fundamental assumptions of much recent research is that U.S. voters have changed since the 1950s. Although this may be true in many ways (declining party identification, less social connection, etc.), we do not have clear ideas about how these changes have affected the way voters come to view candidates or public policy initiatives.

In chapter 6, Lynn Vavreck looks at campaign effects in the 2000 New Hampshire Republican primary and contends that it is time to exploit the "true" lessons of the minimal effects of media research to better understand election campaigns. In doing so, she focuses on the McCain–Bush battle in New Hampshire and examines what happens when voters are personally connected during the campaign. Vavreck, like Scheufele in chapter 2, proposes reassessing these interpersonal contacts to craft a more accurate picture of why people vote as they do. Relying on surveys of New Hampshire voters, Vavreck finds ample evidence that contact with candidates has had strong and predictable effects on personal impressions and vote choice.

Marc Hetherington continues his impressive recent work on the role of political trust in recent elections in chapter 7. Hetherington makes a forceful case

that voters are less trusting of government today than in previous years. He proceeds by arguing that this is neither an odd nor a disconnected finding. Instead, he argues, trust has a strong and direct influence on political attitudes and orientations. Voters' lack of trust constrains the range of issue positions and behaviors on the public agenda and, along with a cynical media, it makes people feel ineffectual as voters. Clearly, these are dangerous effects.

### U.S. Campaigns and Group Identities

This section is comprised of two chapters that consider the role that group thinking plays in American elections. Throughout this volume, we have concentrated on U.S. elections because phenomena long observed here are beginning to appear in cross-national contests. In this section, however, we are dealing with phenomena that may well be country-specific. The United States, that is, has long been a haven for an infinite variety of subgroups and they have been the nation's glory as well as its most vexing problem.

Political parties are one such subgroup. In chapter 8, Sharon Jarvis provides an empirical examination of how party images have been projected between 1948 and 1996. Using a database of campaign speeches, political ads, campaign debates, and news media coverage, Jarvis employs a content analytic scheme to "measure the rhetorical and political nuances of party tokens in political discourse." She finds that elites have used party descriptors in much the same way over the past fifty years, contrary to what "party decline" scholars might assume. Parties are presented rather positively and in hierarchical—rather than egalitarian—terms as an inevitable part of the electoral system. Parties, in short, continue to have a kind of rhetorical vitality.

Chapter 9 continues our resurrection of the Columbia scholarship, with Nicholas Valentino introducing striking experimental evidence in his exploration of how group identities are primed by the media and candidates. Specifically, he focuses on how news media reports on crime can prime racial considerations of broader political issues. He also demonstrates that the power of sociological identities is not dead. In fact, media priming may have supplemented (replaced?) the kind of interpersonal communication initially documented by Berelson et al. and reconsidered earlier in this volume by Scheufele. Americans, it seems, often cannot see past the groups of which they are a part.

### New Modes of Campaign Influence

What will the future bring to U.S. political campaigns? More specifically, what new sorts of communication approaches will be developed in the years ahead to meet the unprecedented complexities of governing one of the largest nations on earth?



Take the U.S. Congress, for example. Although we have numerous studies of how the president and the White House attempt to shape media coverage and influence public opinion, Daniel Lipinski offers one of the first comparable studies of the Congress in chapter 10. In particular, he focuses on how party leaders communicated their positions on the issue of tax cuts during the 1999 session. He finds that parties sought to influence the language and activities of individual members, both on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives and also in their home districts. Even the casual observer of politics cannot help but notice the similarity in phrasing employed by members of the same party on the issues of the day. Lipinski gives us insight into how and why these "talking points" were developed.

Another new development in contemporary political life is the candidate web site. In chapter 11, Robert Klotz provides some of the first empirical data collected on this front. More importantly, he asks fundamental questions about the new medium: Is the information it provides novel or does the Web repeat what can be found elsewhere? Does information presented on the Web take advantage of the interactive possibilities presented by this new technology? Klotz examines Senate candidate Web sites across the 1996 and 1998 election cycles and offers some intriguing preliminary findings. He finds, for example, that Web information is not always novel but that it tends to be more detailed and more positive than information culled from other sources. Second, he finds that the Web was not a high priority for campaigns during those years, perhaps because both the possibilities and dangers of this new technology were regarded in equal measure by the campaigns.

Finally, in chapter 12, Glenn Richardson proposes a fresh way of understanding political advertising. Rather than focusing on "positive" or "negative" or "comparison" spots, Richardson looks at advertising in a broader culture context. He argues that political ads rely heavily on popular culture to connect with voters on a more emotional level than is typically acknowledged. He conducts several case studies and finds evidence of at least four types of genre-specific negative ads. Moreover, Richardson claims that the audiovisual and narrative elements of an ad can evoke emotional responses that overwhelm the ad's more substantive message.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The goal of this volume, to borrow from the jargon of the MBA schools, is to "think outside the box." The New Agendas conference challenged a new generation of scholars to contemplate the dizzying array of developments we have witnessed over the past decade in political campaigns and to offer fresh perspectives about them. While we are excited by the chapters they have contributed, there is still much work to be done. Most obviously, one

need only review the research presented here to see that as many questions as answers have been raised. Maybe more to the point, there are several problems with contemporary political communication research. Four problems seem especially vexing:

1. We need to clarify the critical concepts of "framing" and "priming." One cannot help but be struck by the lack of unanimity Simon describes in chapter 5, but the problem with these constructs is evident in many of the other chapters as well.
2. There has been little attempt to distinguish treatment of the press as a *medium* vs. the press as an *agent*. When we study candidates, for example, we often assume that the media are predictable, if not passive, purveyors of information. In these cases, we presume that the action is with the politicians. When studying the media, however, scholars often talk about how the media "set" the agenda, paying heed to professional norms and biases. Well, which is it?
3. When estimating the effects of campaign communication, we seldom consider the *durability* of those effects. It is true that political psychologists have looked at the atrophy of considerations—largely in an attempt to shed light on the Bayesian properties of information processing—but more often scholars note an instantaneous influence on the campaign and then move on. The question of durability is important, however, especially in the study of elections, where short-term effects may not affect the ultimate forum of interest: election day voting.
4. Similarly, the functional form of communication effects is often ignored. As the field becomes more methodologically sophisticated, we need to test and estimate nonlinear relationships. Campaigns, after all, are *systems* of people, groups, ideas, technologies, events, and chance occurrences. We need to find a way of measuring these constantly interweaving, systemic effects.

While many of the challenges facing studies of political communication are evident in this volume, there are also some impressive unifying elements here. First, many of the authors have a clear desire to dust off some of the classic theories of political communication and apply them to contemporary contexts. Scheufele, Vavreck, and Valentino all go "back to the future" in this sense. For example, after years of scholarly obsession with mass communication, a keen interest in interpersonal communication is obvious in the work presented here.

Second, one finds in this volume a consistent effort to pursue more inventive research designs. Valentino gives us a glimpse of how carefully conceived experimental studies can help us isolate the effects of subtle changes in communicative presentation and content. Too, Jarvis uses a computer program to analyze the speech and rhetorical content of several different forms of political communication in her examination of how parties are "constructed." Although Simon's proposal is even more ambitious, he relies on the same core belief in the need to better utilize the vast potential of computer technologies to facilitate higher level analyses of the form, content, and construction of political communication.



In addition, one finds a common bond of statistical sophistication here. For example, Hetherington and (especially) Althaus rely on the conventional survey approach to explore their topics, but they go beyond the cookie-cutter approach in specifying and estimating their models. While these approaches have been used elsewhere previously, they have only recently been brought to the study of political communication and that is a welcome addition indeed.

Third, there is a movement towards unifying theories across fields. Simon uses the formal theoretical framework of economics to offer a unified conception of framing and priming. Richardson merges traditional political science with communication theories of "genre" to investigate political ads. Vavreck, Valentino, and Scheufele mix sociology and politics in their efforts to detail how people acquire political information. This cross-pollination occurs within fields, as well. Shah, for instance, borrows from political psychology and public law in his treatment of "rights talk."

In the end, our hope is that the analyses and thoughts presented here convey some of the conveners' own enthusiasm and optimism, for it is clearly an exciting time to study political communication. The potential for understanding our complex democracy has never been greater. At the same time, the work in this volume also reflects some of our worries. We are concerned, for example, about voters' abilities to keep up with the enormous changes in communication technology and wonder how these changes will affect the quality and intensity of their political interactions with one another. As citizens of a democracy, we worry too about declining levels of political interest and trust, and wonder whether the mass media are a potential solution to this problem or a cause of it. It does little good, after all, to have a powerful microphone if no one wants to hear what you have to say, or if the microphone you are using systematically undermines your ability to say it. It would be hubris to think that the studies in this volume will solve such broad-based and endemic problems, but it is not foolish to hope that the work presented here will stimulate both students and researchers to take on such challenges and to find new ways of tapping the opportunities presented in an age dominated by myriad forms of political communication.