

Priming and Defusing

Politics is one of many activities for American voters. The traditional notion that individuals review every option before making choices has been supplanted by models that incorporate information grazing, or sporadic searches for material.¹ *Priming* is a perspective that builds on this way of thinking about political information. Developed in regard to the evening news, this approach proposes that people use readily available material to evaluate candidates and that in the media age one of the most accessible sources is television. By its patterns of coverage, television can influence voters' choices between candidates by elevating particular standards of evaluation. For example, television shows that devote extensive coverage to defense matters can increase the importance of defense policy in citizens' assessments. Likewise, news accounts that dwell on environmental concerns can raise the importance of those matters in voting choices.²

Priming has attracted growing attention in relation to television news, but little attention has been paid to its conceptual counterpart, *defusing*. This term refers to efforts on the part of candidates to decrease the importance of particular standards of evaluation. Candidates often have problematic features, such as being seen as weak on defense or lacking a clear vision for the future. It obviously is in their interest to defuse their shortcomings. They can do this either by lessening the overall importance of the topic to the public or by shortening the distance between the candidates to the point where the subject no longer affects the vote.

The concepts of priming and defusing are particularly applicable to the study of campaign advertising. In the same way that the news can alter voter judgments, television commercials can prime (or defuse) the electorate by shifting the standards of evaluation. This

chapter examines priming and defusing through campaign ads and demonstrates that commercials can alter the importance of various factors in voters' decision making. There are a number of examples (such as George Bush in 1988 and Bill Clinton in the 1990s) in which political ads helped campaigners prime and defuse citizens' concerns.³

Informational Shortcuts

To understand priming, it is crucial to understand the notion of information costs. Acquiring information costs people time and effort. It is not easy for ordinary citizens to compile a full record of candidates' backgrounds, policy views, and personal attributes, particularly during election campaigns. Citizens lack the inclination to search for all relevant material, given the expense of compiling information. Instead, people look for informational shortcuts, or what Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky call *heuristics*.⁴ Rather than conducting a complete search that incorporates every nugget of material about candidates, voters use readily available cues. In the media era, television provides some of the most accessible material. By its patterns of coverage and emphasis on particular information, the electronic medium plays a significant role in influencing the standards of evaluation used in voters' selection of candidates.

For most elections, voters call on many standards to evaluate candidates—views about their prospects for election, assessments of their positions on issues, and feelings about their personal attributes. Candidates attempt to prime the electorate by promoting standards that benefit themselves. If their strength lies in foreign policy as opposed to domestic policy, as was true for George Bush in 1992, they seek to elevate foreign policy considerations in voters' decision making. If their strength is being seen as the most knowledgeable or trustworthy candidate, such as with George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000, they will try to persuade voters to make that trait the basis of evaluation.

Candidates conversely attempt to defuse matters that are problematic. They try to lessen the salience of problem areas. George Bush, for example, was seen as wimpish and uncaring at the start of the 1988 presidential campaign. He obviously was not able to remake his personality, but Bush did alter the terms of the campaign

in a way that defused those perceptions, emphasized his toughness, and focused voters' attention on other matters that were not as problematic for him.⁵

Considerable evidence has surfaced about the ability of television to prime viewers, although little attention has been devoted to defusing. Shanto Iyengar, Donald Kinder, and Jon Krosnick have undertaken path-breaking work on priming; they have shown that television can shape standards of evaluation in regard to presidents and political candidates.⁶ Iyengar and Kinder document the power of priming through the evening news: "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged."⁷

Krosnick and Kinder demonstrate the importance of priming with regard to a real-world issue—the Iran-contra affair—which was demonstrably salient to voters in late 1986. Using data from surveys taken before and after the revelation of the scandal, this study showed that intervention in Central America "loomed larger" in popular evaluations of President Ronald Reagan after saturation coverage by the media than before the event was publicized. Priming was also more likely to occur among political novices than among experts.⁸

In addition, Nicholas Valentino shows how crime news affects support for political candidates. Using a novel experimental study, he finds that "evaluations of Clinton's performance on crime was primed powerfully by exposure to crime news, and this effect was largest when the suspects in the story were nonwhite." Issues such as crime and welfare are "race-coded," meaning that media coverage activates stereotypes about minorities. In these situations, viewers often react in prejudiced ways to stories about crime.⁹

None of these projects, though, have addressed the role of television commercials in altering voters' standards. Candidates have obvious incentives to attempt to change the importance of matters in ways that benefit themselves.¹⁰ In fact, based on recent campaigns, political commercials appear to be particularly influential as a means of altering voters' assessments of candidates. Ads are designed to be persuasive, and campaigners frequently seek to shift voters' standards of evaluation. The power to mold the judgments of voters through commercials is a major strategic resource for the contesting of elections.

Standards of Evaluation

The study of priming during election campaigns is complicated by uncertainties concerning the kind of standards used to judge candidates.¹¹ Past work has devoted little attention to the mechanism by which a voter's heightened interest in a subject leads to the incorporation of that factor into the voter's assessments of candidates. For example, Krosnick and Kinder assume in their study of the Iran-contra affair that the increased coverage of the scandal led to the decline in support for Reagan. However, Richard Brody and Catherine Shapiro argue that the criticism of Reagan by elites of both parties, not simply the news of the arms-for-hostages deal, was the crucial factor in the decline.¹²

Both studies, though, ignore a third possibility: the strategic behavior of the participants. In the campaign arena, voters' assessments depend on media coverage, the views of political elites, and the strategic actions of the candidates. In fact, the candidates' activities may be the crucial mechanism because they generate coverage by news organizations and reaction by political elites. Electoral strategies generally involve efforts to alter voters' concerns about domestic and foreign policy, views about the personal traits of candidates (such as leadership, trustworthiness, and appearance of caring), and impressions of the electability of particular candidates. The large number of determinants distinguishes electoral from nonelectoral priming. Government scandals, such as the Iran-contra affair, typically provoke a change in policy standards. But in the electoral arena, other types of standards are also important to voters' assessments.¹³

Experimental studies have solved the problem of how to determine which standards are most salient to voters by assumption. Iyengar and Kinder conducted a series of experiments in which viewers were shown newscasts emphasizing defense.¹⁴ But outside of the experimental setting, there is no way of knowing whether citizens would incorporate defense as a factor in their vote choices. Other studies, such as that of Krosnick and Kinder, ensure salience by using an issue—in this case the Iran-contra scandal—which had obvious relevance for citizens.¹⁵ Iran-contra received saturation coverage from the mass media over a period of several months.

Another way to address the saliency matter is to ask citizens which factors were most crucial in their voting choices. In 1984 and 1988, CBS News/*New York Times* surveys inquired about which

general factors were most important to voters. In 1984, the survey asked in its pre- and postelection waves, "When you vote/voted for president on Tuesday, what will be/was more important in deciding how you vote/voted—the economy of this country, or the U.S. military and foreign policy, or mainly the way you feel/felt about Reagan and Mondale?" In 1988, the item was, "Some people choose among Presidential candidates by picking the one closest to them on important issues. Some other people choose the one who has the personal characteristics—like integrity or leadership—they most want in a President. Which is most important when you choose—issues or personal characteristics?" The results show that the top factor cited by voters in 1984 was the economy (49 percent), followed by the candidates (37 percent), and foreign policy (14 percent). In 1988, 76 percent of respondents named issues as the most important factor, and 24 percent cited personal characteristics as most important.

The crucial question is: As people saw and paid more attention to ads, did their standards of evaluation change? A voting model that reflects how the importance of particular standards changed with different levels of ad exposure can be used to investigate the interpretations of priming, defusing, and no effect. A priming effect is present when the impact of the factor on the vote rises with level of ad exposure. In contrast, a defusing effect is evidenced by a reduction in the importance of the factor, and no effect is demonstrated by a flat line for importance of the factor based on ad exposure or a zigzag line revealing random fluctuations.

I undertook an analysis of the effect of each of the factors on the 1984 and 1988 votes, respectively. Four levels of ad exposure, from low to high, were incorporated, as were controls for intervening factors (party identification, education, age, gender, race, ideology, political interest, and [for 1988] media exposure). Vote choice was a measure of candidate preference for Reagan or Walter Mondale in 1984 and for Bush or Michael Dukakis in 1988.

In 1988, there was little evidence of priming or defusing for people who felt that issues or personal characteristics were important. The lines zigzagged, indicating that among those with low or high ad exposure, there was no systematic difference in the weighting of issues or personal characteristics as factors in vote choice.

However, in 1984, there was significant evidence of priming. Foreign policy moved from unimportant to important as a determinant of the vote as level of exposure to television ads increased. Those

who watched ads were much more likely than were those who did not to cite foreign policy matters as influencing their vote for Reagan. There was also a significant priming effect for economic matters. The more ads people saw, the more likely they were to cite economic matters as an influence on their vote.

Although a number of media stories proclaimed the power of Reagan's personal traits, there was no evidence of ad priming in regard to personal candidate qualities in 1984. Politicians were unable to shift standards in this area despite journalists' reporting on Reagan's "Great Communicator" status. According to voters, ads had more influence on substantive than personal dimensions of evaluation.

Nixon and the Politics of Inevitability

Ads can influence general standards of evaluation, but it remains to be seen whether political commercials can prime or defuse specific factors in vote choice. Elections from 1972 through 2004 represent an interesting opportunity to examine ad priming and defusing in greater detail. Individual elections need to be investigated to determine exactly how ad exposure influenced the factors generally considered to have been important standards of evaluation. The 1972 presidential general election is an interesting setting for an examination of priming. Richard Nixon's general strategy in this race was to characterize himself as a trusted, capable, and responsible leader, in sharp contrast to what he portrayed as an irresponsible and not very trustworthy George McGovern. Nixon also sought to portray the McGovern candidacy as hopeless, in a clear effort to elevate electability as a standard of evaluation.¹⁶

The question in this case is whether the president's ads shifted the standards of evaluation to magnify the significance of personal traits and electability. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various personal qualities. Trustworthiness was the most commonly cited trait (61 percent), whereas foreign affairs (36 percent) and the economy (33 percent) were ranked as the most important problems. Respondents were also asked to assess Nixon's electability to determine how important a factor that may have been in their choice.

There were weak priming effects in regard to the policy problems of foreign affairs and the economy. Neither played a strong role in voters' decision making, and there appears to have been little significant variation based on exposure to campaign ads. However,

there were stronger priming effects for personal traits and electability. The more ads viewers saw, the more likely they were to elevate trustworthiness in their voting decisions. Trustworthiness went from being an unimportant consideration in the vote among those who were not exposed to ads to a statistically significant factor among those who watched many ads. Electability also displayed strong evidence of priming. Its role in voters' decision making became much more important as viewers were exposed to ads. Among those who had not seen ads, electability was a statistically insignificant contributor to vote choice. But among attentive viewers, electability had a substantial impact on the vote.

There were also interesting shifts in the importance of these qualities during the course of the campaign. Between September and November, 28 percent of the sample shifted from not seeing trustworthiness as the most important trait to seeing it as such. Seven percent shifted in the opposite direction, 33 percent cited trustworthiness as most important in both waves, and 32 percent mentioned it at neither point.

Campaign advertising appears to have had some influence. Among those who consistently rated trustworthiness as important, 31 percent did not see ads and 37 percent saw many ads, a statistically significant difference of six percentage points. Political ads therefore demonstrated a priming effect over time.

These effects were consistent with the general strategy used by Nixon against McGovern. Based on his media advertising, the president appears to have shifted the standards of evaluation in a way that elevated personal traits and electability.¹⁷ Voters who saw his ads were more likely to incorporate these factors in their decisions and to use standards favorable to the president.

Defusing Potential Problems: Bush in 1988

George Bush started his fall presidential campaign in a difficult position. Dukakis held a substantial lead in the early summer polls. Bush was reeling from bad publicity surrounding the Reagan administration's negotiations with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and disclosures that Nancy Reagan had consulted an astrologer during her husband's presidency. Bush himself was seen as weak and ineffective.¹⁸

However, according to the theory of priming and defusing, careful advertising can help a candidate shift standards of evaluation.

This is exactly what Bush set out to do in 1988. Through priming, Bush sought to elevate factors advantageous to himself. Meanwhile, matters that hurt him would be defused through television ads and favorable coverage from the news media. If he could not remove his own negatives, he could at least shift the standards to his advantage.

In looking at the impact of various factors on the Bush vote, there was little evidence of priming or defusing on certain issues.¹⁹ For example, there was no shift in the importance of the death penalty or defense issues. The most significant effect was defusing the salience of the environment and the view that Bush did not care enough about people. These matters actually became less relevant to the vote as people saw more ads. Both the environment and caring were potentially harmful to Bush. As an oil-state representative, Bush never had strong environmental credentials. Because the environment as a political issue had risen in importance to voters by 1988, this issue was potentially very negative for him. But the vice president was able to defuse the issue by noting his concern about the environment in ads. In one of his most famous ads, Bush also cast doubt on Dukakis's environmental credentials by arguing that the Massachusetts governor had not cleaned up Boston Harbor.

Bush defused the personality issue by reducing its centrality to American voters. Among those who watched few ads, the matter of whether Bush cared about people was significantly linked to the vote. However, voters who saw and paid more attention to ads considered Bush's personality less relevant. These effects were consistent with the strategic goals of Bush's campaign. They demonstrate how well-organized advertising pitches can improve a candidate's fortunes. Bush achieved defusing effects, and he was therefore able to change the standards of evaluation in ways that benefited him.

Clinton and the Economy in 1992

Clinton advisers James Carville, Stanley Greenberg, and Mandy Grunwald report that in April 1992 they were worried. Their candidate had sewed up the nomination early, but they felt uneasy about the upcoming fall campaign. In a memo that month, Carville and Greenberg noted that Clinton's negatives had risen to a damaging 41 percent and that he trailed George Bush by twenty-four percentage points on the crucial dimensions of trustworthiness and honesty. Focus group participants regularly complained that "no

one knows why Bill Clinton wants to be president" and called him "Slick Willie."²⁰

The Clinton advisers moved into action. In a top-secret memo prepared for what Grunwald euphemistically called the Manhattan Project in honor of the 1940s crash program to build a nuclear bomb, Greenberg wrote, "The campaign must move on an urgent basis before the Perot candidacy further defines us (by contrast) and the Bush-Quayle campaign defines us by malice." According to the *Newsweek* account of this plan, Clinton's problem was not so much being accused of adultery by Gennifer Flowers, avoiding the draft, or having once tried to smoke marijuana, but "the belief that Bill Clinton is a typical politician." The report noted many of the inaccurate impressions people had of Clinton—that he was rich and privileged, that he and Hillary Rodham Clinton were childless, that he could not stand up to the special interests, and that "Clinton cannot be the candidate of change." The campaign, the report said, must "take radical steps" to "depoliticize" its candidate.

Early in the summer, the Clinton camp pretested its fall themes of a New Covenant, fighting for the forgotten middle class, and putting people first. At a series of focus groups in New Jersey, the reactions of voters were stunningly negative. One participant said the New Covenant was "just words . . . glib . . . insulting . . . like blaming the victims." The notion of fighting for the middle class drew these comments: "baloney . . . propaganda." After hearing these comments, Greenberg remarked, "They think he's so political the message stuff gets completely discounted. In fact, it makes it worse."

With the help of a coordinated research program of public opinion surveys and focus groups, the Clinton campaign embarked on an effort to redefine its candidate. At a meeting late in May, Carville suggested, "We need to mention work every 1.5 seconds." Grunwald agreed and said, "By the end of the convention, what do we want people to know about Clinton: that he worked his way up; that he values work; that he has moved people from welfare to work; that he has a national economic strategy to put America back to work."

The next day, they met with Bill and Hillary Clinton to lay out their plan. The proposal, as described by Greenberg, was based on the idea that "in the 1980s the few—leaders in the corporations, the Congress and the White House—neglected the many. The consequences were that work was not honored, good jobs were lost, everyone but the few felt insecure. . . . The answer for the 1990s

had to be a plan to do right by the American people. A plan means a contract. It's not 'Read my lips.' ” The campaign then sketched out a plan to coordinate paid ads on the economy in a small group of targeted states and hope for the future with a variety of media appearances on the network morning shows, *Larry King Live*, and the *Arsenio Hall Show*. The talk show appearances would put Clinton in more intimate settings and allow viewers to get to know him better.

This plan was remarkably successful. Because some interpretations of the 1992 elections have labeled pocketbook voting (that is, casting votes based on economic conditions) the sole reason for Clinton's victory, it is important to recognize the ways in which Clinton's media campaign encouraged economic voting. For example, Clinton was able through his advertising to focus public attention on the economy and his own ability to improve economic performance. People who had high ad exposure were more likely than those of low exposure to make the economy a factor in their votes. They were also more likely to support the view that Clinton had the ability to improve the economy.²¹ At the same time, Clinton was able through advertising to strengthen his own image on the trustworthiness and honesty dimension.

These results demonstrate that people's views about the economy do not merely reflect their daily experiences but instead can be shaped by the candidates' strategies. The 1992 election suggests that citizens' predictions for the economy can be more pessimistic than warranted on the basis of objective economic statistics. One of the reasons forecasting models based purely on economic factors failed to predict Clinton's victory was their failure to take into account the ability of candidates and the media to prime voters.²² Clinton's advertising and the media coverage of the campaign were part of the reason that George Bush was blamed for the country's poor economic performance.

Clinton in 1996

The 1996 election featured a different dynamic than in 1992. The country was at peace, and people generally were feeling prosperous. The recession that had aborted the reelection effort of President Bush was over, and a majority of Americans believed the country was headed in the right direction. But Clinton faced a new problem during his reelection campaign. The country was experiencing peace

and prosperity, but Republicans wanted to revise the role government played in American society. The Republican Revolution proposed to downsize government and reduce the rate of growth in spending on a wide variety of social programs.

In order to combat this new Republican challenge, Clinton moved to the center, reclaimed his old credentials as a New Democrat, and adopted Republican language on the importance of balancing the budget and protecting American values. His first ad, aired in June 1995, touted his crime bill and showed Clinton surrounded by a bevy of police officers. In winter 1995 and spring 1996, the Democratic National Committee broadcast commercials attacking Republicans Newt Gingrich and Robert Dole for their efforts to cut popular social programs.

This two-track message of compassion for the downtrodden and a sense of fiscal responsibility was a powerful component in Clinton's reelection. The impact of each factor on the vote rose in importance as people viewed more ads. The idea that Clinton "cared about people like you" had been important in 1992 as Americans struggled with the economy and President Bush appeared oblivious to the suffering of ordinary people. It remained important in 1996 following Republican efforts to cap the social safety net. As people moved from low to high Clinton ad exposure, the sense that Clinton was caring and compassionate rose in importance to the vote.

The same was true on the crucial dimension that Clinton would bring fiscal discipline to the federal government. As people saw more ads, the president's image as fiscally responsible exerted a stronger influence on the vote. It was a strategy that helped Clinton fight off Dole and defuse the potential problem of being called a tax-and-spend liberal. As a result, he became the first Democratic president to win reelection since Franklin Roosevelt.

Bush and Gore in 2000

The year 2000 featured an open-seat election with no incumbent on the ballot. Seeking to become the first sitting vice president since George Bush in 1988 and Martin Van Buren in 1846 to win election in his own right, Gore secured the Democratic nomination over New Jersey senator Bill Bradley. George W. Bush meanwhile beat back a determined challenge from Arizona senator John McCain. Sensing that the race would be extremely close, both nominees campaigned in the middle. Bush sought to dispel the notion from the

Gingrich era that Republicans were dangerous extremists not to be trusted with America's future and that he was up to the job of the presidency. For his part, Gore attempted to continue Clinton's New Democratic leanings by emphasizing targeted tax cuts and prescription drug benefits for senior citizens and by promising that he would continue Clinton's capacity for strong leadership.

Several of these messages resonated with voters. The more ads that people viewed, the stronger the connection was between believing that Gore was a strong leader and expressing a willingness to vote for him. There also was a strong link between the vote and perceived electability, which rose for both Gore and Bush as ad viewing increased. Similar to the 1992 election, academic models based on economic voting proved way off target. Scholars predicted that Gore would win comfortably, with something between 53 and 60 percent of the two-party vote. Peace and prosperity reigned in America, and these forecasters asserted that Gore would carry the day.²³

However, these predictions ignored the ability of campaigns to alter the terms of debate. Just as Clinton in 1992 was able to make voters feel worse about the economy than warranted by objective evidence, voters did not reward Gore based on the strong economy during the Clinton years. Owing to the Clinton scandal involving Monica Lewinsky, Gore distanced himself from Clinton and thereby prevented himself from being the only beneficiary of economic voting. This inability of the party controlling the presidency to benefit from the economy was one of the most surprising results of the 2000 election.

Bush and Kerry in 2004

The 2004 election saw an effort by President George W. Bush to win reelection over Democrat John Kerry. In this campaign, national conditions did not look advantageous for the sitting president. Throughout the fall, his job approval numbers ranged from the low to high 40s, well below the 50 percent threshold assumed for reelection. More than a thousand American soldiers had lost their lives in Iraq. Between 2001 and 2004, the economy lost around 2.7 million jobs. It was not until 2004 that new jobs started to be created in large numbers.

In this situation, Bush's campaign primed the electorate to see Kerry in negative terms, while Bush's own poor governing record in

several respects was de-emphasized. Kerry was portrayed as a wishy-washy flip-flopper who was not to be trusted while Bush was caring toward the downtrodden and interested in helping middle income earners do better economically. Given that his administration's tax cuts went largely to the rich, the caring and compassionate dimension represented clear points of vulnerability for his reelection bid.

Bush sought to prime trust and defuse caring through a series of ads attacking Kerry's trustworthiness and penchant for changing positions. On issues such as the Iraq war, the Patriot Act, and Bush's education program known as "No Child Left Behind," Bush's advertisements said Kerry had voted for the policy but later switched his position. At the same time, the president surrounded himself with images of working class folks and made jokes about his poor speaking ability by saying, "English is not my first language."

Kerry responded by seeking to undermine Bush's own credibility. He broadcast commercials asserting that Bush had deceived the country by saying there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and had provided tax cuts for rich, corporate interests.

In looking at this fight over problem definition, polling data on trust and caring demonstrated that Bush had made some gains. Voters were more likely to describe Bush (59 percent) as sticking firm to his beliefs than Kerry (37 percent). And Kerry held only a small advantage over Bush on caring (51 to 44 percent), not as much of a margin as Democratic presidential candidates typically hold over their Republican counterparts.

By the end of the campaign, both candidates were using highly emotional ads to scare voters to their side. A Bush spot showed a clock ticking while a father loaded his young children into a minivan. An announcer warned "weakness invites those who would do us harm." A Kerry ad had images of a soldier shooting a machine gun into the air and a car bursting into a gigantic fireball. The announcer proclaimed, "Now Americans are being kidnapped, held hostage—even beheaded."²⁴

Not only were there highly emotional images in the commercials, there were also highly questionable charges. Bush accused Kerry of wanting to create a huge new federal bureaucracy to oversee health care, while Kerry said Bush would restore a military draft and privatize Social Security in a second term. In the end, Bush was able to defeat Kerry by 3.6 million votes across the country.

Conclusion

To summarize, candidates take advantage of the fact that voters use heuristic shortcuts known as priming and defusing to alter citizen standards of evaluation at election time. Through the tie to candidate strategies, priming and defusing help citizens frame their electoral choices. Voters do not have the time or inclination to research every aspect of a politician's record. Their inability to devote a large amount of time to politics leads them to rely on information-processing shortcuts that make use of readily available material, such as media cues, when deciding which standards of evaluation are most helpful.

Past races show that campaigners research both their own and their opponents' strengths and weaknesses. Taking advantage of this material, they seek either to elevate or undermine particular standards in order to gain electoral advantage. This puts them in a situation where they can set the tone of the campaign dialogue.

While not all such efforts are successful, winning candidates typically have been effective at broadcasting ads and eliciting news coverage that emphasize their strengths. Whether the trait is being the most electable candidate, the one most liked, the one worthy of trust, or someone with the most experience, these priming strategies are vital to advertising and contribute to how the election turns out. One cannot fully understand political dynamics without grasping the concepts of priming and defusing.