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Chapter 6

Setting the Agenda

Few subjects are more central to the political system than agenda formation. It is well established that issues come and go and that at any given time only a few matters receive serious consideration by government officials.[1] *Agenda setting* refers to the process by which issues evolve from specific grievances into prominent causes worthy of government consideration. In a political system in which citizens pay only limited attention to civic affairs, it is a mechanism through which the public can influence official deliberations by conveying its sense of which problems are important.

Television is thought to play a crucial role in setting the agenda.[2] Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder's experimental work strongly supports a model of media agenda setting. The respondents to their study of network news regarded any problem covered by the media as "more important for the country" and "cared more about it, believed that government should do more about it, reported stronger feelings about it, and were more likely to identify it as one of the country's most important problems."[3]

However, there has been little extension of this work to political advertising. In a campaign, agenda setting is very important. Candidates use election contests to dramatize issues. They also try to de-emphasize matters that may be problematic for them. George Bush's strategy in 1988 clearly involved a redefinition of the agenda away from certain aspects of Ronald Reagan's record and toward furloughs and flag factories (Michael Dukakis's vulnerable areas) in an effort to move the campaign debate onto terms more advantageous for Republicans. The same thing happened in 2004 when George W. Bush sought to focus the agenda on terrorism and global security. Candidates' advertising therefore should be assessed in terms of its ability to change citizens' perceptions of what are the most important priorities.

The Media's Role in Agenda Setting

A large number of societal problems warrant government attention. Some are domestic in nature, involving fundamental questions of poverty, justice, and social welfare, whereas others include the broad contours of macroeconomic performance or foreign policy. But not all matters of social concern get defined as political problems that deserve government attention. In the United States, many problems are considered to be outside the sphere of government. According to Stanley Feldman, it is common in the individualistic political culture of the United States for subjects to be defined as private matters related to the personal characteristics of individuals. Whereas other societies attribute responsibility for difficulties more generally, a belief in economic individualism weakens attributions of collective responsibility in the United States.[4]

Some areas are seen as problematic but not a priority for institutional deliberations. Paul Light demonstrates convincingly in his study of presidential agenda setting how important it is for leaders to conserve their political capital and focus their attention on a limited number of issues.[5] The chief executives who are the most successful develop specific priorities and are able to communicate their preferences clearly to voters.

From the standpoint of researchers, the most interesting question is how topics move from private concerns to top priorities and what role the media play in this process. Roger Cobb and Charles Elder argue that agenda setting is a way for citizens to convey preferences to leaders in a system characterized by limited participation. They demonstrate how the characteristics of particular policy areas (such as concreteness, social significance, long-term relevance, complexity, and novelty) influence the scope and intensity of political conflicts. These authors suggest that the media—because of their crucial role in defining the nature of conflict—can "play a very important role in elevating issues to the systemic agenda and increasing their chances of receiving formal agenda consideration."[6] Their conclusions are in line with a number of public opinion studies that have found that media exposure is a major factor in how people rank policy concerns.[7] Issues that receive a lot of attention from the press generally are seen as important problems facing the country. Saturation coverage by the media, as occurred during the Watergate scandal, can have a decisive effect on the public agenda.[8]

Other scholars have been more sanguine about media influence. John Kingdon studied agenda formation using lengthy interviews with leaders as well as detailed studies of congressional hearings, presidential speeches, polling data, and media coverage. His interviews reveal that few leaders attribute much of an agenda-setting effect to the mass media. Instead, policy entrepreneurs who advocate new policy proposals are seen as very significant, and emphasis is also placed on interest groups (named as important by 84 percent) and researchers (named by 66 percent). In contrast, only 26 percent of the leaders Kingdon interviewed said the media are important.[9]

Kingdon does suggest ways in which the media can elevate particular issues. Reporters often influence agenda formation by acting as a conduit of information for policy makers.[10] Because policy makers are swamped with the daily demands of governing, they sometimes use media coverage to determine which problems deserve immediate attention. The press can also act as a triggering mechanism for agenda setting by using particular styles of coverage. Through crisis reports or investigative journalism, the media can magnify particular events and turn them into catalysts for official action.

The exact magnitude of the media's impact appears to depend considerably on institutional setting. For example, Light's analysis of agenda setting in the presidency attributes more influence to the media than much of the work conducted in Congress. Light finds, like Kingdon, that the media often act as an indirect channel to the White House. Although they rarely serve as an incubator of new ideas, they are a "source of pressure." [11]

Some investigations have documented the impact of television ads on the public agenda during campaigns. For example, Charles Atkin and Gary Heald studied advertising in a 1974 open seat election to the House of Representatives.[12] Through a survey of 323 voters in the closing weeks of the campaign, they found that ad exposure altered voters' impressions of the most important policy issues in the race. Thomas Bowers, meanwhile, examined a number of Senate and gubernatorial races in 1970 and demonstrated that exposure to newspaper ads corresponded with survey results about most important issues.[13]

Policy and Campaign Components of the Public Agenda

In the campaign world, the agenda includes both policy and campaign components.[14] The policy agenda is rooted in the real conditions of people's everyday lives. If unemployment rises, there will be a parallel increase in concern about jobs. When oil tankers spill their cargo, worry arises regarding the environment. In contrast, campaign issues are more ephemeral and less rooted in objective realities. Questions related to momentum and mistakes often arise quickly, based on electoral developments and media coverage.[15]

Opinion polls have included a series of open-ended questions examining citizens' views about the most pressing policy concerns for the country and about the most important campaign events.[16] Since the 1970s, priorities have undergone a fundamental shift. In 1972, foreign affairs and economic matters dominated the fall general election campaign between Richard Nixon and George McGovern. By the 1974 Senate races, inflation was starting to rise nationally. At the same time, the Watergate scandal that forced the resignation of President Nixon in August of that year was renewing public concern about honesty in government. In 1976, economic issues returned to the forefront, when unemployment and inflation were cited as the most important problems. In the 1980s, foreign affairs again became a major issue, and taxes and spending also emerged as central concerns for the first time. Both Reagan and George Bush devoted great attention in their advertising and political speeches to keeping down the size of government. Bush's most famous line in the 1988 campaign occurred during his convention speech, when he said, "Just read my lips—no new taxes." [17] But in the next four years, prosperity disappeared, and the economy and concern over unemployment again emerged as the top issues in 1992. The 2000 agenda emphasized education, health care, Social Security, morality, and the economy. And in 2004, with an uncertain economy and a controversial war in Iraq, the agenda included a number of different issues: moral values, Iraq, the war on terrorism, the economy, and health care.

Meanwhile, in terms of campaign-related topics, the top developments in the spring of 1976 were that Jimmy Carter and Reagan both won key primaries, whereas the presidential debates were the most notable events in the fall. The 1984 CBS News/*New York Times* survey broke down the most important campaign events for individual candidates, and 60 percent cited Reagan's mistakes in the debates. In 1988, 54 percent named George Bush's attacks on Dukakis as the most important development of the fall campaign. The 1992 primary race saw voters naming Pat Buchanan's unexpected showing in New Hampshire and Bill Clinton's scandals as the most important developments of the nominating campaign, and Ross Perot's candidacy and the debates as the most important aspects of the general election campaign. The 2000 campaign showed the debates, the Mideast crisis and USS *Cole* terrorist attack, Al Gore's lies and exaggerations, and Ralph Nader's Green Party candidacy as the most important campaign developments. In 2004, George W. Bush's lack of veracity on whether there had been weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and John Kerry's Vietnam War experiences attracted considerable attention.

Ads and Agenda Setting

An analysis of ads and agenda setting shows that during the 1972, 1976, and 1984 campaigns, ads were not associated with voters' views on particular policies. For example, the top issue cited in 1972 was foreign affairs, and ad exposure had no significant effect on voters' opinions. There were weak ad effects in 1976 on voters' views about unemployment and inflation and in 1984 on peace and arms control as well as on taxes and spending. By contrast, in George Bush's 1988 general election campaign and Clinton's fall 1992 campaign, ad exposure did play a role in citizens' policy views.[18] Bush's 1988 ads on taxes and spending paid off in a big way, as did Clinton's 1992 ads. Among those who did not watch ads, 21 percent cited taxes and spending as most important in 1988, whereas 46 percent of viewers who had paid attention to Bush's ads cited these issues, a whopping difference of twenty-five percentage points.

Differences were also found in citizens' assessments of campaign events. In 1976, 27 percent of those who did not watch ads cited Carter's doing well as the most important development in the campaign, compared with 36 percent of those who had paid attention to ads. In 1980, Reagan also experienced a substantial effect, of twenty-six percentage points, based on ad viewing among those who cited his debate performance as the most important thing he did in the campaign.

In 1988, too, there were ad effects on the campaign events cited as most important. Eight percent of those who had not seen ads cited Bush's campaign as his top accomplishment, compared with 14 percent of those who had paid attention to Bush's ads. There were significant differences based on ad exposure in viewers feeling that Dukakis was not responding to Bush. Among those with low attentiveness to ads, 6 percent named this problem, whereas among those with high attentiveness, 17 percent mentioned it.[19]

An analysis of the connection between ad viewing and feelings about most important problems and most notable campaign events demonstrates that advertising significantly affected voters' rating of several policy problems (honesty in government in 1974, taxes and spending in 1988, the economy and budget in 1990, and unemployment in 1992). In 1974, seeing and paying attention to ads were linked to citing honesty in government as the most important problem. Similarly, in 1992, ad exposure was related to naming unemployment as the country's top concern. In 1996, seeing Clinton's ads was associated with thinking crime and drugs were the central issues and that Medicare and Medicaid were not as important. In 2000, the top ad effect was found between seeing advertisements for Gore and believing Social Security was the most important problem.

The Influence of Individual Ads

General exposure to campaign ads is associated with citizens' assessments of the public agenda, but what about individual ads? Most past work has examined ad exposure in aggregated form with no distinction made between ads. To explore the impact of individual ads, I analyzed some of those most frequently named. In 1984 the CBS News/*New York Times* survey asked, "Both presidential candidates had a lot of television commercials during this campaign. Was there any one commercial that made a strong impression on you? (If so) Which commercial?" The top Walter Mondale ad named in the post-election survey was the "Future" commercial, whereas Reagan's top ad was the "Bear in the Woods" spot (see Appendix for descriptions of these ads). In 1988, the CBS News/*New York Times* poll again asked which ads made the biggest impression: "Tell me about the commercial for [Bush/Dukakis] that made the biggest impression on you." Viewers picked the "Revolving Door" as Bush's top ad and the "Family/Education" ad for Dukakis.

A 1992 survey asked, "Which television ad run by a presidential candidate this fall has made the biggest impression on you?" Of the people questioned, 24 percent were able to name a specific ad. Perot received by far the most mentions: 109 people cited his ads; 27 cited Clinton's, and 9 cited Bush's. Perot's most memorable ads were his infomercials, mentioned by thirty-eight people, followed by his spot discussing job creation ($N = 19$), his sixty-second spot discussing the legacy of national debt being left to our nation's children ($N = 18$), and the commercial in which he discusses having received a purple heart in the mail from a supporter ($N = 10$). Clinton's top commercials were "How're You Doing?" ($N = 7$) and "Read My Lips" ($N = 5$). Bush's top ad accused Clinton of wanting to raise taxes ($N = 3$). (See Appendix for descriptions of these ads.)

In 1996, the top ad was Dole's MTV ad in which Clinton indicated he would inhale marijuana if he were doing it over again. The second most frequently cited ad was Perot's "It's Your Country" spot, in which a series of young people talk about how important it is to make up your own mind.

To determine the effects of specific ads on citizens' views about the policy agenda, I analyzed ad exposure on those matters seen as the country's most pressing policy problems, controlling for party identification, education, age, race, gender, ideology, political interest, and media exposure.[20] In the case of Bush, Dukakis, Clinton, and Perot, the findings conform to conventional wisdom. However, with regard to Reagan and Mondale, the common view is not supported. Mondale's "Future" ad on defense matters was very effective, at least from the standpoint of having the strongest tie to people's priorities. Among those who had not seen the ad, 20 percent cited peace and arms control as the most important problem, compared with 38 percent of those who had seen it. Mondale's ads also influenced beliefs that restoring pride in the United States had been the most important aspect of the 1984 campaign.

For all the attention devoted to Reagan's "Bear in the Woods" ad, in which the bear was seen as a symbol of the Soviet Union, this commercial had no significant effect on either of the concerns noted: peace and arms control or restoring pride in the United States. Part of the problem may have been the abstractness of the ad. Although the Reagan campaign was apparently confident of the public's ability to understand this ad, the spot contained abstract allusions both to dovishness—the bear may not be dangerous—and hawkishness—we need to be strong. The complexity of this ad may have limited its effect on the agenda.

In 1988, Bush's "Revolving Door" ad was linked to mentions of crime and of law and order as the most important problems facing the United States.[21] Among those who had not seen the ad, only 5 percent cited these problems, compared to 12 percent of those who had seen the ad. This finding fits with evidence cited by Marjorie Hershey, who found that "the proportion of respondents saying that George Bush was 'tough enough' on crime and criminals rose from 23 percent in July to a full 61 percent in late October, while the proportion saying Dukakis was not tough enough rose from 36 to 49 percent."[22] The Dukakis ad did not produce significant effects on any domestic policy dimension.[23]

In 1992, Perot's infomercials were quite effective at focusing attention on the economy, as was Clinton's "How're You Doing?" ad on unemployment. Perot's ads had a simplicity and directness that in an anti-politician year appealed to viewers. Clinton's spot was able to raise public awareness of jobs as an important problem. Focus group tests within the Clinton campaign showed that his commercial "zoomed off the charts" when played for voters.[24]

None of the top individual ads from 2000 significantly influenced people's perceptions of the most important problems facing America.

Women and the "Revolving Door" Ad

No commercial since Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" ad has generated more discussion than George Bush's "Revolving Door." This spot was aired frequently during the evening news and discussed extensively by news commentators. In looking at the effects of this ad on agenda setting, fascinating differences arise based on the personal circumstances of viewers. Among the people most likely to cite crime as the top problem after seeing Bush's "Revolving Door" commercial were Midwesterners and young people.

But most significant were the differences between men and women in regard to Bush's 1988 ads. One of Bush's strongest agenda-setting effects from his "Revolving Door" ad, for example, was among women on the crime issue.[25] After seeing this commercial, as well as the widely publicized Horton ad produced by an independent political action committee, women became much more likely than men to cite crime as the most important issue.

The fact that the ads mentioned rape clearly accentuated their impact on women. According to Dukakis's campaign manager Susan Estrich, "The symbolism was very powerful . . . you can't find a stronger metaphor, intended or not, for racial hatred in this country than a black man raping a white woman. . . . I talked to people afterward. . . . Women said they couldn't help it, but it scared the living daylights out of them."[26]

The "Revolving Door" case demonstrates how the strategies of campaign elites and the overall cultural context are important factors in mediating the significance of advertisements. The way in which this commercial was put together—in terms of both subject area and timing—was a major contributor to its impact on viewers. If Horton had assaulted a fifty-year-old black man while on furlough from a state prison, it is not likely that the "Revolving Door" ad would have affected voters' policy priorities as it did.[27]

The Strategic Dimensions of Agenda Control

Strategic interactions revolve around two key campaign decisions—what subjects to cover in advertisements and whether to attack the opposition. Matters that have attracted citizens' concerns, such as rising unemployment, oil spills, or ethics in government, are the natural subjects of television advertising.[28] The decision to "go negative" is another important part of strategic decision making. In the 1990s, it became widely accepted that negative ads work. Attack commercials are influential because they help candidates control the agenda and drive media coverage, which enables the sponsor to set the tone of the campaign.

No case provides a better illustration of campaign strategy than the Bush–Dukakis race in 1988. Bush seized the initiative at the beginning of the fall campaign by demonizing Dukakis and tying him to unpopular issues. Recognizing that Dukakis was one of the least known nominees in recent years, Bush advisers developed a plan designed to define the terms of the campaign. When it became obvious that Dukakis was the likely Democratic nominee, Lee Atwater gave his staff instructions for what is euphemistically called opposition research—that is, digging for dirt on the opponent's background. Speaking to Jim Pinkerton, the research head of Bush's campaign, Atwater said, "'I want you to get the nerd patrol. . . . We need five or six issues, and we need them by the middle of May. . . . I gave him a three-by-five card, and I said, 'You come back with this three-by-five card—but you can use both sides—and bring me the issues that we need in this campaign.'"[29]

The Bush campaign also picked up attack clues from Dukakis's Democratic opponents in the nominating process, such as Gore. This included the Willie Horton case and Dukakis's veto of legislation that would have mandated the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools.[30] After testing these themes in a series of focus groups, the Bush campaign consciously pursued agenda control through an attack strategy. As stated by Bush's media adviser Roger Ailes, "We felt as long as the argument was on issues that were good for us—crime, national defense, and what have you—that if we controlled the agenda and stayed on our issues, by the end we would do all right."[31]

Dukakis, however, chose a different route. He had earned the nomination by generating a sense of inevitability about his campaign. Through early fund-raising, the development of a strong organization, and cultivation of the view that he was the most electable Democrat, Dukakis was able to play the role of the long-distance runner in the race. Because his advertising generally was positive (with the exception of his timely attack on Richard Gephardt's flip-flops), he did not offend his opponents' voters. Dukakis thereby was able to gain opposition support when voters' preferred candidates bowed out. The lesson he learned from the nominating contest, then, was that if he was patient and took the high road, victory would come eventually.

According to Estrich, his campaign manager, Dukakis decided that his fall race would, among other things, center on character and integrity. She said, "An important element of our fall strategy . . . would emphasize competence . . . [and] the value of integrity. You saw this at the convention and throughout the campaign—that Mike Dukakis stood for high standards. That's the kind of campaign he would run, the kind of governor he had been, the kind of President he would be."[32] Along with the nomination experience, which had rewarded a positive campaign, this decision inevitably led to a strategy that would not respond to Bush's fall attacks.

However appropriate this approach may have been in the nominating context, with its sequential primaries and multiple candidates, it was disastrous in the two-candidate context of the general election. Dukakis's decision allowed Bush to set the tone of the campaign and to define the terms of debate. Bush's issues—flags, patriotism, tax-and-spend liberalism, and crime—became the agenda of the campaign. Little was heard about homelessness, rising poverty, and the unmet social needs of the Reagan years.

The consequences of these campaign choices are reflected in an analysis that shows the impact on voters after seeing each candidate's top ads: Bush's "Revolving Door" and Dukakis's "Family/Education" ad. Bush was able through his "Revolving Door" commercial to widen the perception of crime as the most important problem facing the country. In contrast, exposure to Dukakis's ad decreased the importance of crime in the eyes of voters. Viewers who thought crime was the most pressing policy problem also were more likely to say they would cast ballots for Bush over Dukakis.[33]

Bush's attacks took a toll on the Massachusetts governor. Not only did the attacks allow the vice president to dictate the terms of debate in the campaign, but Dukakis's failure to respond adequately created the perception that the Democrat was not a fighter. As stated by Estrich, "The governor was hurt by the attacks on him—the mental health rumors, the attacks on patriotism, the harbor and furlough issues—and perhaps most of all by the perception that he had failed to fight back, which went to his character. . . . We did fight back on occasion. The problem is we didn't fight back effectively, and we didn't sustain it. We created a perception that we weren't fighting back, and I think that hurt us much more."[34]

Dukakis's decision was even more harmful in light of the very favorable media coverage reaped by Bush. In an intensive analysis of network news coverage in 1988, Kiku Adatto found that newscasts ran segments from the "Revolving Door" ad ten times in October and November, making it the most frequently aired commercial of the campaign. Overall, twenty-two segments about Bush's crime ads were rebroadcast during the news, compared with four for Dukakis's ads.[35]

These news reports reinforced Bush's basic message. A number of stories appeared during the general election campaign citing political professionals who believed that Bush's tactics were working and that Dukakis's strategy was a complete failure. Because these assessments appeared in the context of news programs, with their high credibility, they were more believable than if they had come from paid ads.

A Fixed Agenda

The agenda in 1992 differed significantly from 1988 in emphasizing a single topic—the economy. In 1988, the election took place in a setting characterized by a fluid agenda and no single dominating concern, but in 1992, the Clinton campaign's favorite line about the agenda was "The Economy, Stupid" in honor of a sign Clinton adviser James Carville kept posted in the Little Rock headquarters. About two-thirds of Americans identified the economy and unemployment as the crucial problems facing the country, far exceeding any other issue.

The presence of a fixed agenda altered the strategic terrain of the presidential campaign. Rather than attempting to redirect people's priorities, as had been the case in 1988 when peripheral concerns such as crime were made central to voters, candidates geared their appeals to jobs and economic development. In the case of Clinton and Perot, the message was simple. Economic performance was poor under George Bush, with gross domestic product growth in the negative range. President Bush discussed the economy, although he wavered between claiming that things were not as bad as his opponents charged and admitting that the economic picture was terrible but blaming congressional Democrats.

Bush's attempt at agenda redefinition—raising questions about Clinton's character in order to deflect attention from Bush's own record—was not very successful. After being urged privately by Ailes to "go for the red meat [and] get on the bleeping offensive," the president challenged Clinton on numerous personal dimensions in speeches, interviews, the debates, and spot commercials.[36] In one of his most hard-hitting ads, Bush used a series of ordinary men and women to criticize Clinton's integrity: "If you're going to be President you have to be honest." "Bill Clinton hasn't been telling anything honestly to the American people." "The man just tells people what they want to hear." "About dodging the draft." "I think he's full of hot air." "I wouldn't trust him at all to be Commander in Chief." "I think that there's a pattern, and I just don't trust Bill Clinton." "I don't think he's honorable. I don't think he's trustworthy." "You can't have a President who says one thing and does another." "Scares me. He worries me. You know, and he'll just go one way or another."[37] It is interesting to note that the campaign edited out a criticism about Clinton's trip to Russia because backlash developed against Bush for hitting below the belt on this charge. In a play on Carville's sign, the Bush people also posted a message in their headquarters: "TRUST AND TAXES, STUPID." However, in light of Bush's decision to sign onto a congressional deficit reduction bill that raised taxes, thereby negating his well-publicized 1988 campaign pledge of "no new taxes," it was difficult for Bush to have much credibility on the trustworthiness front.

National opinion surveys demonstrated little increase in concern about Clinton's character during the fall campaign. For example, in a CBS News/*New York Times* survey taken September 9 to September 13, 42 percent of respondents thought Clinton responded truthfully to the charge that he had avoided the draft, and 25 percent did not. Seventy-nine percent felt the allegation would have no effect on their vote.[38] In an October 12 to October 13 CBS News/*New York Times* poll, 79 percent of respondents claimed that their votes were unaffected by Bush's attacks on Clinton's antiwar activities at Oxford University.[39] Clinton's focus groups revealed little damage: "Many people indicated that they thought he [Clinton] had been evasive or had even lied, but they said that wouldn't affect their vote."[40]

Bush's efforts to redefine the agenda were unsuccessful because of unfavorable media coverage and the strategic response by Clinton and Gore. Although the media devoted considerable time and space to Bush's allegations, the spin on the story generally was negative to Bush and his chief adviser, Jim Baker. Headlines repeatedly emphasized Bush's "assaults" on Clinton and "smears" on Clinton's character. Spokespeople for the Arkansas governor meanwhile labeled the tactics *McCarthyite.* News of State Department searches of the passport records of Clinton, as well as of his mother, brought this stinging rebuke from Gore: "The American people can say we don't accept this kind of abuse of power. We've had the Joe McCarthy technique and the smear campaign; now we have the police state tactics of rummaging through personal files to try to come up with damaging information."[41] Combined with sympathetic news coverage, this response undermined the legitimacy of Bush's attack strategy.

In addition, Bush's advertising attacks suffered because they were unfocused. After the election, Bush's advisers said their efforts were hampered because "we never knew if we were focusing on Arkansas or Clinton's character or big spending. I don't think it ever clicked. I don't think the character assault was framed very well."[42] Bush's focus groups furthermore revealed a boomerang effect from voters on the trust issue: "They didn't trust Clinton's word or Bush's performance." For a while, Bush's advisers had the candidate substitute *truth* for *trust.* But new wording did not change the final outcome.[43]

A Fluid Agenda

The biggest change in the agenda between 1992 and 1996 was the move from a fixed agenda dominated by the economy back to a fluid one that was broader and more diffuse. Whereas 60 percent of voters in 1992 cited the economy as the most important problem facing the country, the types of issues named in 1996 were quite varied: government spending, high taxes, crime rates, the drug problem, and the possible budget reduction of Medicare and Medicaid. Overall, voters were far more positive about the economy. In 1996, according to network exit polls on election night, 59 percent of Americans rated the economy as excellent or good. In 1992, 19 percent gave the economy excellent or good ratings. This upturn in consumer confidence raised people's spirits and made a majority of voters feel the country was headed in the right direction.

The fluidity of the agenda in 1996 made that year look more like 1988 than 1992. Rather than having to frame every part of their message around the 800-pound gorilla of the economy, Clinton, Dole, and Perot enjoyed greater strategic flexibility. The result was that the campaign centered on competing conceptions about the country's direction. Clinton successfully framed the election's choice as a referendum on the Republican revolution of downsizing government. Did voters want to "CUT MEDICARE," "SLASH EDUCATION," and "GUT THE ENVIRONMENT?" Through ads, speeches, and news events, Clinton pounded the message that Republicans were uncaring, insensitive, and not to be trusted with America's future.

Dole, by contrast, attempted to redefine the agenda along several different dimensions. His first frame, developed at the Republican convention and continued through mid-September, was on his economic plan of a 15-percent across-the-board tax cut. Unfortunately for him, only one-quarter of Americans believed he would actually deliver a tax cut for them, according to a national public opinion poll. When his economic program failed to arouse much voter interest, Dole shifted to crime and drugs in September. He aired the MTV ad, accused the president of failed liberal policies, and made some short-term gains in the polls. But the movement in his direction did not persist. It was not until the closing weeks of the campaign, when a series of Democratic fund-raising misdeeds came to light and Dole began to push the character attack, that polls tightened, and by election day Dole did better than expected. Rather than losing by the expected fifteen points, Dole lost by eight. Polls in congressional races around the country also showed a movement in a Republican direction in the last two weeks, which helped the GOP retain control of Congress. The character issue resonated with people in a way the tax-cut issue and attacks on Clinton's crime and drug policies did not. The allegations of the Democratic National Committee's fund-raising illegalities were designed to portray Clinton as a politician who was not to be trusted. This turned out to be Dole's most successful effort at agenda redefinition during the fall campaign.

A Varied Agenda

Education, health care, taxes, and Social Security dominated the 2000 policy agenda, along with complaints about George W. Bush's inexperience and Gore's lack of trustworthiness. Each candidate attacked the policy prescriptions and personal weaknesses of his opponent. A CBS News/*New York Times* survey at the end of September found that 71 percent of respondents believed Gore had prepared himself well enough to be president, compared with only 49 percent who felt that way about Bush. Gore also was given an edge with voters in the areas of affordable health care (56 percent thought he would handle that issue better, compared with 35 percent who believed that of Bush) and caring about people (66 percent said Gore was caring whereas 53 percent said Bush was). However, more voters believed that Bush would make U.S. defenses stronger (53 percent, compared with Gore's 18 percent) and that Bush would reduce taxes (43 percent, compared with Gore's 27 percent).[44]

By the end of October, though, some of these impressions had changed. After weeks of criticizing Gore's trustworthiness, Bush gained an advantage. A CBS News/*New York Times* survey found that 48 percent believed Bush said what he really believed rather than what he thought people wanted to hear, compared with 37 percent who said that of Gore. More people also gave higher marks to Bush (48 percent) for personal honesty and integrity than to Gore (42 percent).[45]

These opinions were reinforced by late-night comedians and *Saturday Night Live* skits that lampooned both major presidential candidates. In looking at the "joke war," Gore was the object of more jokes in August (78 to 43 for Bush), Bush was more ridiculed in September (94 to 34 for Gore), the two were virtually tied in October (126 lampooning Bush and 120 making fun of Gore), and the campaign closed with thirty-four jokes about Bush and eleven about Gore in the first week in November. Overall, from January 1 to November 6, Bush was the subject of 548 jokes, whereas Gore was the butt of 386. For example, making fun of Bush's mangling of the word "subliminable," David Letterman said, "Earlier today, George W. Bush said that he has one goal for these debates. He wants to show the American people that he's presidentiamable." In regard to Gore, Jay Leno laughed about Gore's lies and exaggerations, saying, "You've gone from George Washington, who could not tell a lie, to Bill Clinton, who could not tell the truth, to Al Gore, who can't tell the difference."[46]

In this situation, the candidates used ads to sway voter opinion. In his commercials and public statements, Bush complained that Gore had a tendency to exaggerate and that if you couldn't trust him, how could you trust his policy proposals. For his part, Gore aired an ad in the closing days of the campaign asking whether Bush was "ready to lead" the country. Voter concerns were heightened when, a few days before the general election, a Maine attorney uncovered information concerning a 1976 arrest record for Bush for driving under the influence of alcohol. The resulting media clamor forced Bush off message and helped fuel a last-minute surge by Gore that led to the closest election result in recent history. Following several weeks of ballot recounts and legal wrangling over contested voting in Florida, Bush eventually was declared the winner by 5 electoral college votes.

A Bifurcated Agenda: Terrorism Versus the Economy

The agenda in 2004 featured a battle between an agenda bifurcated between terrorism and security concerns on the one hand and domestic economic issues. American elections typically center much more on domestic than foreign policy considerations. But the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., and the subsequent wars with Afghanistan and Iraq placed foreign policy directly onto the political agenda. In terms of campaign-related topics, Bush attempted to portray Kerry as a flip-flopping liberal out of touch with the American mainstream.

For example, in early advertising in spring 2004 Bush complained that Kerry would penalize drivers with a 50-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax, would "raise taxes by at least $900 billion," would "weaken the Patriot Act used to arrest terrorists," opposed "body armor for troops in combat," and "opposed weapons vital to winning the war on terror— Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Patriot missiles, B-2 stealth bombers, F-18 fighter jets."[47] A Bush spokesperson justified these attacks by saying "Kerry sailed through the Democratic primary process with little or no scrutiny. In order to make an informed judgment about whether Kerry is a suitable choice for president, voters need to have this information." However, the Kerry campaign saw a more nefarious motive. Strategist Michael Donilon complained that Bush staffers "have decided that the only way to win this election is to destroy John Kerry."[48]

For his part, Kerry attempted to characterize Bush as "a corporate toady who wants to foul the air and water, outlaw abortion, and export U.S. jobs overseas." Among other claims, ads by the Massachusetts Democrat argued that Bush "wants to roll back the Clean Air and Clean Water acts," name "anti-choice justices" to the U.S. Supreme Court, and supports "sending jobs overseas."[49]

In general, Kerry's early ads were much more positive than Bush's. One study found that 52 percent of claims in Bush's spots were attack-oriented, compared to 19 percent for Kerry.[50] This was in keeping with the general thrust of the Bush organization to paint Kerry in negative terms while he still was relatively unknown to the electorate as a whole.

When asked at the beginning of the campaign which one issue they most wanted to hear the presidential candidates discuss, voters named the war in Iraq (23 percent), economy and jobs (20 percent), health care and Medicare (13 percent), and education (5 percent).[51] However, by the fall, these priorities had shifted somewhat. Public interest in the economy and jobs was ranked the number one priority (20 percent), followed by the war in Iraq (18 percent), health care and Medicare (15 percent), and defense (4 percent).[52]

Throughout the fall, Bush attempted to maintain the focus on terrorism. One of his more provocative ads was called "Wolves." In it, a wolf runs through a forest, while a female announcer warns: "In an increasingly dangerous world, even after the first terrorist attack on America, John Kerry and the liberals in Congress voted to slash America's intelligence budget by $6 billion. Cuts so deep they would have weakened America's defenses. [Image of a pack of wolves resting on a hill] And weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm."[53]

Not to be outdone by animal imagery, Kerry started broadcasting an ad featuring an eagle and an ostrich: "The eagle soars high above the earth. The ostrich buries its head in the sand. The eagle can see everything for miles around. The ostrich? Can't see at all. . . . Given the choice, in these challenging times, shouldn't we be the eagle again?"[54]

Within a day, individuals outside the campaign had put up a new Web site titled WolfpacksforTruth.org which advertised the "real story" on Bush's "Wolves" commercial. Taking on the voice of the wolves, the site explained that the wolves were tricked by George W. Bush. "They told us we were shooting a Greenpeace commercial! When the camera crew showed up, we wondered why they were all driving Hummers. . . . Little did we know we were being tricked into this vicious campaign attack ad! We are not Terrorists. . . . We are a peaceful pack of wolves. All we want in life is: Live in tree-filled forests. Drink clean water from our rivers and streams. Breathe fresh and clean air."

On election day, though, it was clear how much Bush's effort at focusing the agenda on terrorism and moral values had paid off for him. National exit polls revealed a clear tie between seeing particular issues as most important and voting for the president. Bush won 85 percent of the votes of those who cited terrorism as their most important issue, compared to 15 percent for Kerry. Seventy-eight percent of those naming moral values as the most important consideration in the election cast ballots for Bush, compared to 19 percent who did so for Kerry. In contrast, Kerry's top issues were the economy and jobs (he received 81 percent of the vote of individuals saying this was their most important issue), education (76 percent of their vote), and Iraq (75 percent).

These results suggest how potent a combination cultural values and security concerns have become for the general public. While American elections generally have centered on domestic economic concerns, Bush successfully redefined the national agenda away from the economy, education, and health care to cultural and security issues. His unstated but clearly visible mantra during the campaign became, "It's Terrorism, Stupid." In so doing, he took advantage of voter anxiety in the post-September 11 world and repositioned his party as the one that would best defend America against both foreign and domestic threats.

Conclusion

Since voters are not able to focus on every important issue, campaigners seek to prioritize the contest by focusing attention on a few items. If they can set the agenda in a way that is favorable to their own electoral interests, this is a tremendous help in the campaign as a whole. Some issues such as national security often are thought as favoring Republicans, while topics such as health care generally help Democrats. As seen in a number of different elections, setting the agenda through campaign advertisements is one of the major strategic goals in any campaign.

As argued in previous chapters, candidates cannot make an issue important if it is not already salient with voters. It is impossible to create relevance that does not previously exist. If the campaign features a fixed agenda with one dominant item, candidates have to address that topic. However, they have greater strategic flexibility when the agenda is fluid or varied. In that situation, their speeches and ads can increase or decrease the perceived saliency of a topic by giving it more attention. Raised issues can confer major electoral advantages if the candidate is seen as having greater competence or credibility on that particular topic.