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in Political Communication

The 1996 Presidential Campaign

A Communication
Perspective

Edited by
Robert E. Denton, Jr.

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Series Foreword

Those of us from the discipline of communication studies have long believed that communication is prior to all other fields of inquiry. In several other forums I have argued that the essence of politics is “talk” or human interaction.¹ Such interaction may be formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal, public or private, but it is always persuasive, forcing us consciously or subconsciously to interpret, to evaluate, and to act. Communication is the vehicle for human action.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that Aristotle recognized the natural kinship of politics and communication in his writings *Politics* and *Rhetoric*. In the former, he established that humans are “political beings [who] alone of the animals [are] furnished with the faculty of language.”² In the latter, he began his systematic analysis of discourse by proclaiming that “rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion.”³ Thus, it was recognized over twenty-three hundred years ago that politics and communication go hand in hand because they are essential parts of human nature.

In 1981, Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders proclaimed that political communication was an emerging field.⁴ Although its origin, as noted, dates back centuries, a “self-consciously cross-disciplinary” focus began in the late 1950s. Thousands of books and articles later, colleges and universities offer a variety of graduate and undergraduate coursework in the area in such diverse departments as communication, mass communication, journalism, political science, and sociology.⁵ In Nimmo and Sanders’s early assessment, the “key areas of inquiry” included rhetorical analysis, propaganda analysis, attitude change studies, voting studies, government and the news media, functional and systems analyses, technological changes, media technologies, campaign techniques, and research techniques.⁶ In a survey of the state of the field in 1983, the same

authors and Lynda Kaid found additional, more specific areas of concerns such as the presidency, political polls, public opinion, debates, and advertising.⁷ Since the first study, they have also noted a shift away from the rather strict behavioral approach.

A decade later, Dan Nimmo and David Swanson argued that “political communication has developed some identity as a more or less distinct domain of scholarly work.”⁸ The scope and concerns of the area have further expanded to include critical theories and cultural studies. Although there is no precise definition, method, or disciplinary home of the area of inquiry, its primary domain comprises the role, processes, and effects of communication within the context of politics broadly defined.

In 1985, the editors of *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984* noted that “more things are happening in the study, teaching, and practice of political communication than can be captured within the space limitations of the relatively few publications available.”⁹ In addition, they argued that the backgrounds of “those involved in the field [are] so varied and pluralist in outlook and approach, . . . it [is] a mistake to adhere slavishly to any set format in shaping the content.”¹⁰ More recently, Swanson and Nimmo have called for “ways of overcoming the unhappy consequences of fragmentation within a framework that respects, encourages, and benefits from diverse scholarly commitments, agendas, and approaches.”¹¹

In agreement with these assessments of the area and with gentle encouragement, in 1988 Praeger established the series entitled “Praeger Series in Political Communication.” The series is open to all qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as contemporary and historical studies. The key to characterizing the studies in the series is the focus on communication variables or activities within a political context or dimension. As of this writing, over seventy volumes have been published and numerous impressive works are forthcoming. Scholars from the disciplines of communication, history, journalism, political science, and sociology have participated in the series.

I am, without shame or modesty, a fan of the series. The joy of serving as its editor is in participating in the dialogue of the field of political communication and in reading the contributors’ works. I invite you to join me.

Robert E. Denton, Jr.

NOTES

1. See Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Symbolic Dimensions of the American Presidency* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1982); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Gary Woodward, *Political Communication in America* (New York: Praeger, 1985; 2d ed., 1990); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Dan Hahn, *Presidential Communication* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

2. Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 5.
3. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 22.
4. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, "Introduction: The Emergence of Political Communication as a Field," in *Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981), pp. 11–36.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–27.
7. Keith Sanders, Lynda Kaid, and Dan Nimmo, eds. *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University: 1985), pp. 283–308.
8. Dan Nimmo and David Swanson, "The Field of Political Communication: Beyond the Voter Persuasion Paradigm," in *New Directions in Political Communication*, eds. David Swanson and Dan Nimmo (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990), p. 8.
9. Sanders, Kaid, and Nimmo, *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984*, p. xiv.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Nimmo and Swanson, "The Field of Political Communication," p. 11.

Preface

Every four years a gong goes off and a new Presidential campaign surges into the national consciousness: new candidates, new issues, a new season of surprises. But underlying the syncopations of change is a steady, recurrent rhythm from election to election, a pulse of politics, that brings up the same basic themes in order, over and over again.

James David Barber

In 1996, Americans conducted a presidential campaign that resulted in the lowest national turnout since 1924, where less than half of registered voters participated in the defining act of democracy. On election day, according to exit polls taken from those who did vote, 57 percent thought President Clinton is dishonest and over 60 percent thought he lied about aspects of the Whitewater real estate deal and “filegate.”

I am reminded of the academic hypothetical question often asked, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there, does it make a sound? Clearly there was a presidential campaign with speeches, conventions, ads, and debates, but was anyone listening? The first night viewing of the Republican convention was down 21 percent from 1992. The first-night viewing of the Democratic convention was also down 21 percent. Likewise, viewership of the first Clinton/Dole debate was down 26 percent from the Clinton/Bush debate of 1992. In fact, the final Clinton/Dole debate had the lowest rating of any televised presidential debate in history—even with the dramatic increase in the number of homes with television, the 1996 debates were seen by fewer viewers than any of the historic 1960 Kennedy/Nixon debates (*The Hotline*, 1996, 6).

Perhaps detecting the lack of public interest, media coverage of the campaign also declined from the “feeding frenzy” of the 1992 contest. Campaign cov-

erage on the networks' nightly news fell 40 percent; down from 60 hours/14 minutes to 45 hours/48 minutes. And even on election night, network ratings were the lowest ever recorded by Nielsen in an election year. Just 39 percent of homes with television viewed election night returns (*The Hotline*, 1996, 5–6).

So the question becomes, did this lack of interest reflect satisfaction with the candidates and the status quo or growing cynicism of our political system? Campaigns, of course, have form, shape, content, but do they still have meaning?

It seems we are in a kind of transition in America. "Anger" has become the political watchword of the 1990s (Tolchin, 1996; Craig, 1996). Leaders from both parties worry about the absence of civility, the decline of intelligent dialogue, and rising decibels of hate speech. The unifying theme behind the social anger of the 1990s is the target of *government*. Government suddenly became the scapegoat for all that had gone wrong with our society.

Actually, voices of frustration were beginning to be heard in 1984. By 1988, Ronald Reagan capitalized on the emerging frustration of many Americans. Critics and academics labeled it as simply "the angry white male." However, the watershed elections of 1992 and 1994 revealed increasing waves of anger among all voters. Voters became more volatile, less patient, and simply more angry and frustrated than ever before.

In the aftermath of winning the "cold war," the political climate became one of public distrust, cynicism, and even fear. At least according to public opinion polls, many Americans lost confidence in their government and trust of elected officials and politicians. Government and the political process were viewed as dominated by special interests rather than notions of the "common good" for all Americans. Citizens felt caught between the cross fire of self-interested politicians, special interest groups, and mega corporations.

According to Francis Fukuyama (1995), Americans are experiencing a "crisis of trust." At the heart of democracy is the notion of a contract. In theoretical terms, we call it a "social contract." And at the heart of any contract is the notion of trust. There was a time in America when citizens understood the terms of their relationship or contract with government and with each other that was based trust. The concept is very simple. I won't kill you, if you won't kill me. I'll help protect your property if you help protect mine. I'll help build your barn if you will help build mine. If something happens to me, I know that as a member of the larger community, my children and family will be taken care of. Our contract with each other was based on mutual respect, honesty, and responsibility.

Our contract with government was based on trust too. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people. It meant that the common good would prevail. Government, in all its actions, would be fair, just, and operate in the interests of all citizens. Today, it appears that we no longer trust government, corporations, or each other. For too many Americans, our "social contract" has become null and void.

Presidential campaigns are our national conversations. The presidential campaign of 1992 and the congressional elections of 1994 provided an opportunity to define or to redefine who we are as a nation. What does it mean to be an American? What is the role of government? How should we treat minority interests? How should we provide health care? How should we take care of the poor, the sick, and the elderly? How can we protect individual freedom? How can we provide prosperity and opportunity for all Americans?

Across the years, candidates voiced a variety of perspectives and answers to these questions. But largely, the voices of the public remained quiet. Some fear that citizen concern, frustration, and anger have turned into public cynicism. For the more optimistic, 1996 represented a time of national prosperity, peace, and relative goodwill. For the pragmatic, a Democrat won because he ran on a moderate Republican agenda. For the cynic, in the words of ABC News Correspondent Jeff Greenfield, the 1996 campaign was "the most uninteresting presidential election in my lifetime. You don't have a cutting-edge candidate putting anything on the table. Clinton is running out the clock. It's not about anything" (Owen, 1997, 217). In the end, voters settled for the status quo but are clearly unhappy with the nature of politics itself.

For communication scholars, the essence of politics is simply "talk" or human interaction. The interaction may be formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal, public or private, but always persuasive, forcing us as individuals to interpret, to evaluate, and to act.

Political campaigns are highly complex and sophisticated communication events: communication of issues, images, social reality, and personas. They are essentially exercises in the creation, re-creation and transmission of "significant symbols" through human communication. As we attempt to make sense of our environment, "political bits" of communication comprise our voting choices, worldviews, and legislative desires.

The purpose of this volume is to review the 1996 presidential campaign from a communication perspective. The analyses go beyond the quantitative facts, electoral counts, and poll results of the election. Each chapter focuses on a specific area of political campaign communication: the communication functions and activities across phases of the campaign, the early primary period, the nomination conventions, the debates, political advertising, the discussion and framing of issues, the new influence of the Internet, the impact of political cartoons, and the campaign roles of spouses.

In the first chapter, Robert E. Denton, Jr. provides an overview of the 1996 presidential contest utilizing a communication model of campaigns. The model identifies six essential elements common to all candidates and that cut across all phases of a campaign. However, the rhetorical functions and impact of the elements differ dramatically across the four phases of campaigns. The model attempts to capture the dynamism of the elements and hence the campaign by exploring the interaction among the elements in the various stages.

In chapter 2, Judith S. Trent examines the early campaign period. It was one

of the most unique in American history. In addition to starting earlier than ever before, the primary season ended earlier than ever before. Even with 11 potential Republican candidates and an unpopular incumbent, the primary season was over in just six weeks. The period was also marked by the emerging dominance of the incumbent, increased reliance on new technologies, earlier and more extensive use of television advertising, and the vast amount of money collected and spent by the candidates before the primaries even began. The communication functions of this period are identified and set the stage for the general campaign.

In chapter 3, David M. Timmerman and Gary M. Weier analyze the nominating conventions. The authors view the rhetoric of the political conventions as institutional discourse, using Kenneth Burke's concept of identification to view the tactics and strategies of the parties to promote their institutional message. While both parties produced coherent, unified, and positive "shows," the Democrats better positioned themselves to promote identification with the American public than did the Republicans. Ironically, the Republicans boasted about their "diversity," while the Democrats promoted their "family values."

In Chapter 4, Robert V. Friedenberg provides an analysis of the debates. The debates did provide an opportunity for the public to gain insight into both the issue positions of the candidates and the personality and nature of the candidates themselves. Generally, Dole was not successful in drawing distinctions between Clinton and himself on issues, and he was forced to be more aggressive and partisan in tone. Although Clinton won the debates based upon traditional evaluative considerations, they had virtually no impact upon public opinion or candidate preference among voters. In the end, Clinton debated effectively, avoided mistakes, and was perceived the winner of the events.

In chapter 5, Rachel L. Holloway explains the strategic importance of Clinton's rhetoric for the election and for presidential discourse in general. The chapter outlines traditional tensions between public-purpose and private-interest politics and the values associated with each. Holloway then presents a description and analysis of Clinton's campaign discourse. Ultimately, Clinton was able to create a strategic middle ground through discourse that was values-centered, other-centered, and of a feminine style. Clinton moved to the middle in terms of policy and used a rhetoric that conjoined people and transcended traditional dichotomies of electoral politics.

In chapter 6, Lynda Lee Kaid focuses on the effects of political advertising during the primary and general election campaigns. In addition to assessing the effects of spots on voters, Kaid provides a content analysis of candidate advertising in terms of three elements of videostyle: verbal content, nonverbal content, and production techniques. Overall, Clinton's percentage of negative attacks was the highest in history despite the general perception that Dole was the more negative of the two. Interestingly, the ads contained more issue information than television news, thus providing a better forum for policy comparisons between the candidates. However, both candidates used video manipulation and produc-

tion techniques to create a sinister impression of the opponent. There were few Clinton ads that did not use doctored footage. Although voters continue to express dissatisfaction with negative ads, Clinton was successful in prevailing on issues and creating the impression that Dole was the negative one.

In chapter 7, Edward H. Sewell, Jr. examines editorial cartoons during the 1996 presidential campaign. Sewell's analysis includes over 1,400 cartoons drawn by 54 different cartoonists. The largest number of cartoons appeared just before the conventions, followed by a steady decline toward election day. Interestingly, each candidate was represented in cartoons roughly proportional to their final vote percentages. Many cartoonists mirrored public opinion, finding the campaign very boring and dull. Cartoonists were quick to notice the ideological transformation of Clinton. Campaign issues and events, as well as candidate images, all provide fodder for ridicule or analysis by cartoonists. There appears to be an alarming trend toward more generic, less controversial political cartoons.

In chapter 8, Rita Kirk Whillock investigates candidate use and impact of the Internet, the only genuine innovation of the 1996 presidential campaign. While perhaps not having a significant impact on the outcome of the election, Web activity quickly became a mainstay of candidate and campaign communication. Sites provide customized, targeted, immediate, and interactive messages. The Internet provides opportunities for message identification and reinforcement by providing "issue networks" for those of like minds. Whillock provides an overview of candidate sites as well as use of the Internet to monitor the political conventions and the presidential debates.

In chapter 9, Denise M. Bostdorff examines the roles of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Elizabeth Dole as running "mates" in the 1996 campaign. These much-accomplished and, in some instances, controversial spouses generated a great deal of media hype and speculation. In the end, neither appeared to be major factors in the electoral outcome of the election. Bostdorff argues that potential first ladies must balance competing public demands of staying within the boundaries of traditional feminine behavior and exhibiting a certain degree of independence expected for accomplished, professional women. Such constraints pose additional rhetorical difficulties when the wives seem to tilt too far in the "masculine" direction. In her analysis, Bostdorff examines the historical evolution of the first lady role, the parallel rhetorical constraints faced by first ladies, and how Hillary Rodham Clinton and Elizabeth Dole managed the competing demands.

In chapter 10, Craig Allen Smith explores Clinton's rhetorical transformation of political coalitions by reviewing the "Jeremiadic logic" of Clinton's 1992 campaign speeches, his first two years in office, and his 1996 campaign rhetoric. Smith's analysis explains how Clinton went from the rhetorics of 1992-94 to the reelection rhetoric of 1996. He also speculates on the rhetorical challenges of Clinton's second term. Ultimately, Clinton devised an innovative approach to presidential leadership that emphasized "bargaining among equals without

retribution, discussions with publics functionally related to the policy questions, a secondary role for personal popularity, an avoidance of public pressuring, and an increasing use of eulogies and other epideictic opportunities to cultivate a political center.”

In the final chapter, Henry C. Kenski, Carol Chang, and Brooks Aylor attempt to explain the popular vote by examining the electoral college vote, the demographic base of the presidential vote, the role of gender in 1996, the issue reasons for the vote, and the candidate trait reasons for casting ballots for the candidates. The chapter is successful in linking strategy to electoral success, image to issues, and messages into votes.

Presidential campaigns communicate and influence, reinforce and convert, motivate as well as educate. Bruce Gronbeck (1984) argues that campaigns “get leaders elected, yes, but ultimately, they also tell us who we as a people are, where we have been and where we are going; in their size and duration they separate our culture from all others, teach us about political life, set our individual and collective priorities, entertain us, and provide bases for social interaction” (496).

In 1992 the “national conversation” was intense and inclusive. After 30 years of voter alienation, millions of citizens once again entered the national dialog. In 1996, few citizens listened, watched, or cared about the campaign. Only 24 percent closely followed the campaign, compared to 42 percent in 1992. Four in 10 could not name Dole’s running mate. Viewership for the conventions and debates were an all-time low. Howard Kurtz (1996) observed, “more folks seemed fascinated by John F. Kennedy Jr.’s wedding than the battle for his father’s office” (A1). Less than a quarter of eligible voters selected the leader of the “free world.” Too many millions remained silent. Political communication scholars should remember that *more communication does not mean better communication*. More technology does not mean more *effective* communication. Perhaps by better understanding the role and process of communication in presidential campaigns, we may somehow improve the quality of our “national conversations.”

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Acknowledgments

Among the traditional scholarly activities of an academic career, I have edited four books. This volume is my fifth experience. Colleagues often inquire why I would “waste time” editing a book. As the argument goes, one wastes a great deal of time correcting the mistakes of others and, in some cases, salvaging poorly written material. The editorial work of constructing bibliographies, answering obscure queries, doing the index, and all those other annoying details just don’t merit the professional rewards of sole-authored projects or journal publication.

However, the truth is, I rather enjoy the process. I enjoy contacting and discussing chapter ideas with outstanding scholars and colleagues. I enjoy the dialogue and learn from their insights and analyses. Some critics desire a volume with a single “voice” or perspective. In contrast, I enjoy a diversity of approaches and a variety of “voices.” My philosophy of editing a project is simple. Recruit good people and let them make their arguments. If there is such a thing as truth, it results from the clashing of ideas. This is the foundation of the notion of the “marketplace of ideas.” The contributors made this another most rewarding and enjoyable endeavor. I appreciate their participation in the volume and their wonderful, insightful contributions. But more important, I value their friendship.

I want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Communication Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. I also want to thank Robert Bates, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Virginia Tech, for his continued support of administrative, professional, and scholarly activities. He understands the importance of the “right mix” that makes my job a privilege and pleasure.

Finally, it is family members and close friends that sustain us, encourage us,

and provide a sense of belonging and security that frees us to read, write, and pursue projects of interest. Thankfully, they provide the joys of life beyond academe. Bobby, Chris, and Rachel, thanks for enriching and, in many ways, saving my life.

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Chapter One

Communication Variables and Dynamics of the 1996 Presidential Campaign

Robert E. Denton, Jr.

A COMMUNICATION MODEL OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

Campaigns, from a communication perspective, are exercises in the creation, re-creation, and transmission of “significant symbols.” Political campaigns are an essential part of our national conversations, conversations about our national goals, social objectives, national identity, and future courses of action. Communication activities are the vehicles for social action. This model attempts to locate, isolate, analyze, and describe the communication variables of the presidential campaign process.¹

There are two basic assumptions underlying the model. First, there are several essential elements of the campaign that are common to all candidates and that cut across all phases of a campaign. Second, these common elements differ dramatically in terms of rhetorical functions and impact across the phases of campaigns. Thus, while the elements remain the same, the roles they play and their impact upon strategy and outcomes differ over time.

The model explores the interaction of six key elements over the four stages of a presidential campaign. Both campaigns and communication more broadly understood are social processes rather than discrete events. The model attempts to capture the dynamic nature of communication within the evolving structure of a presidential campaign.

The Keys to a Presidential Campaign

There are six elements that are crucial to developing an understanding of the presidential campaign process: the strategic environment, organization, finance,