

**SECOND EDITION**

# **PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS**

**Issues  
and Images  
in the  
Media Age**

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**MYRON A. LEVINE**

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**MYRON A. LEVINE**

**Albion College**



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To my father, David Levine,  
for his love, hard work, sacrifice,  
and faith in the abilities of his children.

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## PREFACE

**D**oes American democracy work in the age of television? Can Americans use elections to hold their government accountable? Are Americans offered a choice at the polls based on manufactured personal images or one based on more substantive policy concerns?

This book is written in the tradition of V.O. Key: Voters are not fools. Issues count in presidential elections. While there is still great disagreement regarding the sophistication of the American voter and how, exactly, issues are incorporated in the voting decision, there is a virtual consensus in the more recent voting behavior literature that issues do influence presidential voting. However voters may vary in their sophistication, they are nonetheless capable of choosing presidential candidates they prefer on key issues.

Yet, despite the evidence, journalists, political pundits, and filmmakers often argue the exact opposite point of view—that elections fail as an instrument of democratic choice and accountability. Indeed, there is a strong belief, in the American popular culture, that issues do not count in the presidential race, that politics has been stolen from the people by a cadre of professional image-makers, pollsters, and spin doctors.

How can the existence of this popular belief be explained despite the volume of political science evidence to the contrary? In part, the failure lies with a political science literature that has become so methodologically complex that it is often understood only by persons narrowly trained in the field. Recent writing may point to the importance of issues in the presidential decision, but the evidence is so quantitative and dense that it has not permeated popular discussion. In this book I have sought to “translate” this evidence, to take the findings of complex voting studies and make them accessible to a broader public.

But this book does more than simply present a summary of voting studies which, in their statistics, fail to capture the dialogue, content, drama, and nuance of presidential elections. In studying American elections, it is important to look at individual races and analyze what candidates say, not just how voters respond. No analyst can fully assess the mix of issues, candidate images, and partisanship in the presidential race without first reviewing the specific events and dialogue of a particular election. In the later chapters of this book we will review recent presidential elections with special attention to the televised campaign—that part of the presidential campaign that most Americans see. We will analyze political advertisements for the content of their messages. (Transcriptions of many political spots are included in the text.) Such a review should help dispel the popular misperception that presidential campaigns are won solely by the actions of professional image wizards.

This book contains an in-depth look at contemporary presidential elections with a focus on political advertising, inasmuch as the advertising contains the messages that are presented to the American voter. While personal image-building remains an important part of the presidential campaign, issues, too, are an important part of the campaign dialogue. Political advertising is not as issueless or irrelevant as is commonly assumed. In fact, the issues are often in the ads, and frequently the most effective images in a presidential campaign are those that are issue-based, not personality-based. Presidential campaigns are won on substance as well as on images of a candidate’s personal leadership abilities.

American presidential campaigns and voting behavior seldom meet the strictest tests for prospective issue voting. The major candidates rarely offer a clear choice of detailed, workable policy solutions on issues of importance to voters. Still, to note the imperfections of campaign dialogue is not to conclude

that issues have been excluded from the presidential race. Far from it. Whatever the shortcomings of the televised campaign, voters are still presented with messages that allow them to distinguish meaningfully between the candidates.

In a presidential year, media messages regarding the presidential race are so pervasive that voters cannot help but learn something of substance about the candidates. Voters cannot totally shut out news reports and competing paid messages. Voters also possess a great deal of political information that they acquire through their daily lives. They know substantially more about the presidential race than they do about races for less visible offices.

Voters often cast their ballots retrospectively—on whether they want the incumbent party or president to continue in office or if they prefer a change. They can also distinguish differences in the broad, general policy directions offered by the major presidential candidates. Voters can discern the differences between the candidates on certain key or salient easy-to-understand (as opposed to more complex) issues. Video-literate Americans “reason” as they filter media messages. They understand the exaggerated nature of paid political claims. They also use their own personal experiences and their perception of national economic conditions to help them to evaluate the competing claims of presidential contenders.

In part, the decay of political parties and the post-1968 reforms in the presidential nominating process have allowed issues—as well as personal images—to play a new role in the presidential race. The presidential nominating process is no longer controlled by party leaders or “bosses.” In the general election, a party’s presidential nominee can no longer rely on party identification or strong political party organizations to turn out a winning vote in November. Instead, we have entered the era of the candidate-centered campaign where a presidential aspirant must forge his or her own relationship directly with voters. Oftentimes this is done through televised image-making. But the reformed nominating process has also given a new prominence to active interest groups and issue constituencies. In assembling a winning coalition, the presidential hopeful will often take a stance on issues to appeal to large blocks of voters.

While issues play a greater role in presidential elections than the critics of televised democracy admit, still, all is not well with the electoral process. The post-Watergate system of public funding was an attempt to remove the role of money from the presidential race. Under the reformed campaign finance rules,

the nominees of the two major parties were to spend approximately the same amount in their pursuit of office; they would owe little to special interests. Voter choice was not to be contaminated by imbalances in campaign spending. Over the years, however, a variety of provisions or loopholes in the campaign finance laws have allowed private money to reenter the presidential race. The emergence of precandidacy campaign PACs (political action committees), "soft money," and independent spending by unaffiliated PACs are important and troubling features of the modern presidential campaign.

A second and more troubling problem concerns the nature of modern campaign discourse. While political attacks have always been a part of the American presidential campaign, in recent years negative advertising has reached new heights. In the shallow and bitter political exchanges that marred the 1994 midterm elections, perhaps the nastiest in American history, House and Senate candidates rarely discussed substantive issues or offered policy solutions. Instead, candidates simply promised that they were not part of the mess in Washington and attacked the personal qualities and private business dealings of their opponents. The vitriol of the U.S. Senate race in Virginia, where Democrat Chuck Robb and Republican Ollie North characterized each other as an immoral liar, was perhaps the worst in what was a bad year for quality campaign dialogue nationwide.

Yet, even in the midst of the mudslinging of 1994, substantive concerns were part of the voting decision and the GOP tidal wave that swept the nation. The Republicans won a majority in both houses of Congress (taking control of the House for the first time since the 1952 election!) by picking up 8 new Senate seats and 53 additional House seats (an astonishing accomplishment!). Immediately after the election, Senator Richard Shelby, of Alabama, reinforced the Republican trend by switching from the Democratic party, giving the GOP a 53–47 majority in the Senate. The Republicans also won 8 additional governorships in 1994, giving them control of the executive mansion in 31 of the 50 states.

Voters ousted the Democrats from power as they held the party accountable for failing to cope effectively with the problems posed by high taxes and unbalanced budgets. The deficit reduction and tax reforms that Bill Clinton had initiated during his first two years in office were not enough to satisfy voters who saw continued big-spending and big-government proclivities in his health plan and in his administration's approach to



government in general. Clinton had campaigned for the presidency in 1992 as a “new Democrat,” but by 1994 exit polls showed that many voters had come to see him as a continuation of the big-government, Democratic Washington establishment. Personal factors, too, were part of the 1994 vote, as Clinton continued to receive largely negative ratings from the public despite what had been a fairly prosperous and growing economy.

Although voters have expressed their disenchantment with negative advertising, it continues because it works; it influences voter decisions. The concluding chapter of this book will evaluate potential reform measures for dealing with the problem of negative advertising. Ads that distort an opponent’s record or attack a candidate’s personal qualities diminish democracy. However, not all negative ads are as bad as the critics complain. There are negative ads that contribute to the substance of campaign dialogue by presenting accurate information that allows voters to distinguish between the competing action orientations of the candidates on issues that voters deem to be of importance.

The final chapter of this book also reviews contemporary electoral trends, including the evidence on voter realignment and dealignment. The book concludes with a discussion as to just what strategies Republicans and Democrats can best follow in their pursuit of the White House if voters respond to substantive concerns more than is commonly believed.

The second edition of *Presidential Campaigns and Elections* has been thoroughly revised. Earlier chapters have been rewritten to include the newest research, as well as examples from the 1992 presidential campaign—an election that is discussed in great detail in Chapter 10. The chapter on the 1988 election has been fortified by the inclusion of voter studies that point to the importance of both retrospective evaluations and substantive concerns in determining the outcome of the Bush-Dukakis race. The second edition of this book also incorporates much of the perspective of Samuel Popkin’s *The Reasoning Voter*.

Bill Clinton’s election in 1992 helps to validate much of the argument presented in the first edition of the book. The Democrats lost presidential elections in the 1968–1988 period because they nominated candidates that many voters, especially middle-class voters, found unacceptable. Clinton won the presidency by reorienting the party to the concerns of working-class and middle-class voters, winning back those so-called Reagan Democrats who had defected from the party in previous elections. Yet, the preferences of this powerful swing group are unstable,

and in the 1994 mid-term election many of these voters returned to the Republican banner. Exit polls also indicated that voters who backed Ross Perot in 1992 broke two-to-one in favor of the Republicans in 1994. By 1994, as noted above, Clinton had lost much of his "new Democrat" image. He also faced the unparalleled hostility of a group that can best be described as Clinton haters. This hostility permeated the public's attention in talk radio. It remains to be seen whether or not Clinton will be able to win reelection in 1996. Much depends on how the public evaluates both his personal qualities and his performance in office, as well as the personal qualities and substantive orientations of his Republican opponent.

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# POLITICAL ADS

AD	CAMPAIGN	
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Pain	Bush, 1992	5
What I Am Fighting For	Bush, 1992	7
Remember?	Clinton, 1992	9
Eisenhower Answers America	Eisenhower, 1952	117
Eastern Seaboard	Johnson, 1964	132
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