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Roderick P. Hart: Campaign Talk

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Campaign Questions

THE 1996 presidential campaign was hardly galvanizing. The incumbent, William Jefferson Clinton, never really relinquished the double-digit lead he held from early September through election day. The challenger, Bob Dole, ran a campaign as plain as his name and the small Kansas town from which he hailed. Even Ross Perot failed to provide the excitement he had provided in 1992: his running mate was even less distinguished than the one he had picked four years earlier; his advertising was more traditional, as was his campaign financing (to legitimate the Reform Party he accepted matching public funds); and he lobbed fewer salvos at the press for their several impertinences. For their part, the American people spent the summer of 1996 watching Olympic runners try to outpace the Dow. Few of them voted that fall and those who did vote voted overwhelmingly (perhaps even superstitiously) to keep things as they were—Republicans in the Congress and a Democrat at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The outcome of the election was determined by the fates of people's 401(k) plans.

Uninspiring though it was, the campaign was not without its curiosities. Even though the Republican Party had been unusually successful in fund-raising, by April of 1996 President Clinton had \$20 million left to spend, fourteen times more than his opponent, largely because Senator Dole had spent so much so quickly trying to secure his party's nomination.¹ Money was also on the Democrats' minds when they were required to give back \$235,000 in campaign contributions to a property development company in Korea whose potential importunings made everyone nervous (including federal investigators). All of this was a drop in the bucket for Steve Forbes, who spent \$30 million to secure 900,545 votes, an expenditure of \$33,133.16 per vote received.²

The 1996 campaign produced more facts: Bill Clinton embraced the V-chip; the American people embraced Liddy Dole at the Republi-

can convention; and Clinton aide Dick Morris embraced a young woman he should not have embraced. The result of these embracings was that Bill Clinton became the first Democrat twice elected to office since Franklin Roosevelt, even though he did not capture even 50 percent of the popular vote. The media were bored as well: news coverage of the 1996 campaign was down 60 percent from 1992, 100 percent from 1988, even though campaign expenditures were at an all-time high.³ Never bored themselves, the nation's pollsters scurried about the country uncovering such facts as these: a continuing gender gap, voters who did not trust their president but who wanted him in office anyway, two debates that changed few minds (and that were scarcely watched), a good number of voters who did not recognize Jack Kemp's name, and a sizeable majority who found New Gingrich annoying.⁴

Here is another fact about the 1996 campaign: Bob Dole, the self-declared "most optimistic man in America," used less verbal optimism in his campaign speeches than any Republican since Tom Dewey with one exception—Barry Goldwater in 1964. Another fact: Bill Clinton, who has been described as a man of "conspicuous compassion," used more human-interest language ("you," "us," "people," "family") than any candidate from either party between 1948 and the present, with the exception of Hubert Humphrey.⁵ Compared to President Clinton, candidate Dole was conspicuously more ambivalent, more likely to talk about bureaucratic procedures and personalities than about concrete realities, more self-absorbed than even Ross Perot, and almost twice as likely to cling to patriotic images than either of his opponents. Whereas President Clinton stressed the common ties among the American people, Mr. Dole used twice as many denial words ("can't," "shouldn't," "couldn't") as his Democratic rival. Despite the genuine affection that many Americans had for Bob Dole, his speech was a disaster area.

When one reflects on the 1996 presidential campaign, these facts make sense. More curious, perhaps, is that they were unearthed by a computer program called DIRECTION, developed by me to assess the unconscious language choices people use when talking to one another.⁶ DIRECTION is a humble device—it looks only at the kinds of words people use, ignoring completely how and why they are used.

Originally developed some twenty years ago for large mainframe computers, DICTION has been rewritten to work on the powerful personal computers now available. More recently, DICTION has been put to work in connection with the Campaign Mapping Project, a research endeavor codirected by me and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, funded by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations, and designed to map the contours of American politics during the last fifty years. In connection with that project, some twenty thousand textual samples have been inspected by DICTION, including campaign speeches, political ads and debates, print and broadcast news, and a sample of letters-to-the-editor (to get a sense of the people's voice). Texts collected from each of the thirteen presidential elections between 1948 and 1996 are now housed in DICTION's database, and this book is the result of those labors.

Many people are suspicious of computers, especially when used in connection with politics. Charges of mindless reductionism ring out when something as textured as a human utterance is transcribed, keyboarded, and then pigeonholed by a computer. Surely the novelist John Barth seemed right when observing that a computer could not "act on a hunch or brilliant impulse; it had no intuitions or exaltations; it could request but not yearn; indicate, but not insinuate or exhort; command but not care. It had no sense of style or grasp of the ineffable; its correlations were exact, but its metaphors wretched; it could play chess, but not poker."⁷ Barth may be correct but I think he is not. I believe that computers can appreciate a sense of style and I believe that in the hands of a patient individual, programs like DICTION can grasp a bit of the ineffable, appreciate the roots of metaphor, and distinguish between yearning, exhorting, commanding, and requesting. Barth may well be right about poker.

This book reports what DICTION found when rummaging about in the nation's attic. Because a computer has been used here, and because it has been used to inspect such a large amount of data, the picture painted will be a landscape, not an etching ... better yet a billboard. Either way, it will be panoramic, which is what makes computers helpful. Because they are capacious, computers can collect the many different voices making up a political campaign—the politicians, yes, but the media and the people too. Because they are reliable,

computers can ensure that the same thing is focused upon each time they are used; as a result, they cannot be distracted by the chance event, the momentary bias. Because my computer program focuses on language, it examines the one phenomenon that cuts across a political campaign. That is, DICTION may be deaf to a stump speaker's vocal intonations but it will remember that the speech was about Medicare. DICTION will be blind to an advertisement's visual bounties but it will remember that its topic was Medicare. DICTION knows nothing of Dan Rather's *savoir faire* but it will remember, most assuredly, that he reported on Medicare. Because a campaign moves so quickly, because it involves hundreds of thousands of political decisions and political personnel, having the assistance of a patient accountant like DICTION makes practical sense, especially if one is concerned with Medicare.

Using a computer to study campaigns also makes sense because a campaign is a torrent, no a hurricane, of words. As I will discuss in chapter 2, many people feel superior to language, as if they were its masters and not it theirs. This is a natural arrogance but it is also fatally revelatory. Bob Dole could call himself an optimist, but he could not behave like one. His words betrayed him, and the American people sensed that. But how? Did they focus on what Mr. Dole said, on what he failed to say, or on what he said failingly? When they listened to him did other, more utopian, campaigners come to mind? To the backs of their minds? In this book, I will not assume that knowing campaign language is all that must be known. But it is one thing that must be known, especially because it is so easily ignored or dismissed. Political language is like the air we breathe—innocent of utility until emphysema sets in or until the EPA calls attention to its detectable poisons. Studying a thing that is undervalued at best, trivialized at worst, brings out the contrarian in me.

Studying campaigns anew is also a contrarian's enterprise because so much has already been written about them. This has been especially true in the United States, where campaign analysis has become a cottage industry. Every four years, the National Science Foundation is besieged with grant requests from social scientists interested in studying campaigns, and this agency has been generous with its funds. Typically, these monies are funneled through the University of

Michigan's National Election Studies or the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center so that extensive surveys of political opinions can be run, thereby giving the nation a running total of how it feels about itself. Important work like Samuel Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter*, Sidney Verba and his colleagues' *Voice and Equality*, and Steven Rosenstone and Mark Hansen's *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* have told us much about what the American people think when thinking politically.⁸

But a political campaign is more than opinionizing. The stuff of a campaign must also be understood—that which did not exist before the campaign began but whose creation helped form campaign attitudes. Social scientists have often avoided studying these matters since textuality is complex. Knowing what a word means, or how it means, is no easy thing, a phenomenon that has kept attorneys handsomely employed since the beginning of that gentle profession. But just because a thing is hard to understand does not mean it can be ignored.

With that as its premise, this book covers campaign materials from a single vantage point—that of word choice. It seeks a fresh understanding of politics by presuming that all campaign texts intersect with one another: the candidate's morning speech becomes fodder for CNN's noonday report; the CNN reporter's supercilious attitude inspires an angry citizen to write a letter to the local paper; that letter is read by a neighbor while half-watching a political commercial; the ad inspires a counter-ad by an outraged opponent; a print reporter covers the resulting contretemps and then asks the candidate a question at the next photo opportunity. A campaign is all of these rhetorical things and more as well.

Given this complexity, citizens now consume campaigns in great gulps. They tire quickly when doing so, but that only inspires media professionals to find ever-new modes of engaging them. In 1992, for example, the candidates sat on the couch with NBC's Katie Couric and during the 1996 campaign Web-sites proliferated (with a result yet to be determined). But some researchers wonder how significant the mass media are to a political campaign since 65 percent of the electorate selects its candidate by the late-summer conventions and, hence, before the blizzard of advertisements.⁹ And yet if political cam-

CHAPTER 1

paigns are run only for the remaining 35 percent, that still amounted to 34 million Americans in 1996, a not insignificant number. Besides, other researchers show that media-centric campaigns can be powerful, that George Bush may well have lost the 1992 election because his fellow citizens believed what the media told them about their economic circumstances rather than looking into their own pocket-books.¹⁰ And here is an even more ominous note: with so many news organizations now conducting their own polls, the press is increasingly in danger of making the news rather than reporting it.

And so this book assumes that what people say about governance is important. Mapping the language of democracy—across time and circumstance, across voice and medium, across candidate and party—provides a useful cultural reconnoitering even as it becomes an exercise in practical politics. By taking campaign texts seriously and even by taking unserious texts seriously (Jay Leno comes to mind, as does *Politically Incorrect*), we can better understand what ails the nation. “Politics,” says Wilson Carey McWilliams, a preeminent student of the American experience, “is fundamentally a matter of speech, and in democracies, of public speech. But it also confronts America with a public that more and more lacks both the arts of listening and the friendship of critics and guides.”¹¹ To develop that art, that friendship, facts are required. This book offers some.

MUST WE CAMPAIGN?

The remainder of this chapter asks three questions, the first of which is the most fundamental: why campaign at all? Surely when the images of Roger Ailes, Webster Hubbell, and Lee Atwater spring to mind and then are linked to the icons of the 1990s—faux Internet pages, endless advertising, MTV disclosures, mudslinging, and push-polls—many citizens declare a pox on the activity. Campaigns make politics unpretty, but we must also ask how tidy a democracy must be to be functional. Somehow, after all, the American people have blundered through fifty-three presidential elections and still seem robust. Indeed, it is only slightly casuistic to suggest that the torpor

they now feel during campaigns serves a prosocial function: it keeps politics on their agenda, however imperfectly, even as it keeps totalitarianism at bay. Despite their deficiencies, that is, campaigns keep people talking about politics and they do so with a helpful periodicity. In Rousseau's terms, campaigns create an appetite for democracy by sanctioning acquiescence to the general will.¹² Every four years the American people are asked to eat their broccoli. A good many do.

But campaigns also serve more avowedly positive functions:

1. *Campaigns teach.* Russell Neuman and his colleagues have reported that the often maligned medium of television has considerable capacity to teach people about politics, that those effects are heightened during campaigns, and that television is an especially effective teacher for persons with modest cognitive skills.¹³ Similarly, David Sears and Nicholas Valentino have investigated how preadults learn about civic affairs, and they find strong campaign effects. According to them, a campaign acts as a punctuating device that accelerates youngsters' political educations, especially their partisan predispositions.¹⁴ Larry Bartels reports that people learn as much from campaigns today as they ever did, perhaps suggesting that television and the other new media have not had the dumbing-down effect some allege.¹⁵ And numerous studies show that campaigns broaden citizens' agendas, making them pay attention to political matters previously irrelevant to them.¹⁶ During the 1996 election, for example, young voters were required to think seriously about a declining social security trust fund, white voters to imagine the struggles undergone by Hispanic immigrants, and urban dwellers to imagine a federal government less responsive to their future needs. Some of this learning was painful, no doubt, but the campaign unquestionably brought important issues to the surface.

2. *Campaigns preach.* During elections, a democracy is re-performed. Through its rituals, its pacing, its daily unfoldings, a campaign makes a population a citizenry. Even the half-aware bus patron riding to work in the early hours of the morning becomes a citizen-rider as the campaign billboards whiz by. Our worker may decry the billboards but those cries are also part of the democratic process,

and the campaign gives them presence. Some scholars call this an “assignment of legitimacy” whereby the citizen claims the right to have an opinion about affairs removed from his own home but, just as quickly, cedes the resolution of those problems to a representative body.¹⁷ During the campaign, our rider notices other ordinary people on campaign commercials and thus becomes a “spectacle for himself,” changing from rider to citizen and then, in Rousseau’s terms, to “a member of the city.”¹⁸ This is no mere academic transformation. Studies show that campaigns typically increase “regime support” among the electorate, tying them closer to the national purpose.¹⁹ Even the grumbling, that is, becomes functional grumbling during campaigns.

3. *Campaigns sensitize.* Here are two curious facts: Allan Kornberg and Harold Clarke report that support for elected officials in Canada falls (sometimes precipitously) after elections but then picks up again when the next election rolls around—largely regardless of current empirical circumstances.²⁰ Bartels echoes that finding when observing that presidential debates often increase voters’ admiration for both candidates, ostensibly because debaters take viewers’ problems seriously.²¹ Rather than alienating us from politics, that is, campaigns may be a relatively happy time in a nation’s life. And the fact that campaigns are calendrical means that such systemic reinforcement is delivered on a regular basis. An unrelenting campaign schedule also ensures that candidates’ awareness of the nation is heightened. The much-despised length of a campaign becomes functional when it asks candidates to become weary in their neighbors’ behalf, surely an acid relational test:

By the time a candidate becomes president-elect, he (eventually she) will have learned to cope with intense media scrutiny, to staff and maintain a flexible organization, to manage contending factions, to attract the votes of millions of citizens, to appear credible and persuasive as a speechmaker and television performer, to deflect the attacks of opponents, to survive high-pressure debates with other candidates, to devise and constantly refine a political strategy, to articulate a policy vision, and to recover and learn from inevitable, potentially fatal, political mistakes.²²

4. *Campaigns activate.* Campaign effects are not only philosophical; they can also be overt. One study showed that between Labor

Day and election day in 1992, the number of individuals who identified voting as an important duty of citizenship increased from 48 percent to 55 percent.²³ An allied, although somewhat perverse, finding is that though only 55 percent of the American people went to the ballot box in 1992, a full 75 percent claimed to have done so when questioned afterwards by pollsters.²⁴ Not only do campaigns increase “civic lying,” but they also heighten people’s senses of political efficacy—the feeling that they make a difference in the political equation.²⁵ This is a terribly important effect that no system of self-governance can be without for long. If an election does nothing more than increase a people’s sense of choice, it has served an important function. Indeed, a poststructuralist might even claim that the act of a citizen who makes an active, conscious, and loud decision to refrain from voting—the sort of posturing one hears when liquor is at hand and when the shadows lengthen—is itself a kind of civic attachment. Perhaps this is why researchers find that the more political information is broadcast into a community, the more likely its citizens are to talk about politics.²⁶ And so the newspaper editorials may be unkind, the broadcasts biased, the candidates poorly informed, and the advertising offensive, but a campaign never really fails unless it inspires silence.

Hosannas are rarely sung at the end of a campaign and that is a democratic shame. A good campaign teaches a culture its culture, helps it set its priorities, and sorts out the visionary from the visionless (one is reminded of Jimmy Carter at the end of the 1980 campaign, George Bush in 1992). A good campaign expands what we think about as citizens and puts us in touch with people whose problems are different from our own. In the United States, at least, political candidates eat a great deal of bad food as they move about from locale to locale, and that is an important, even necessary, kind of civic indigestion. It signals a willingness to embrace the expanse of the citizenry, to use its separate histories to find its common future. And so when voters roust themselves out of their slumber on those quadrennial November mornings, something sacred happens. Modern cynicisms aside, a democrat must learn to love those moments.

MUST WE CAMPAIGN SO BADLY?

Those of a more pessimistic bent can find within campaigns the deadliest of sins: sloth (too few Americans go to the polls), gluttony (the media dominate the political agenda), envy (pollsters engage in internecine warfare), and greed (PACs as the handmaidens of Satan)—to name but four deadly sins. Presidential campaigns now last virtually an entire year, which means they can dominate 25 percent of the waking experience of citizens who have no other life. As political time contracts, political space expands. Despite the marvels of media technologies, candidates still dash from Atlantic to Pacific and to the intervening lakes with a regularity that has not changed in fifty years. (Ohio, as it turns out, has been their most popular port of call since 1948.)²⁷ Campaign financing is also dispiriting. In 1996, Democrats and Republicans raised over \$880 million between them, a 50 percent increase over the 1992 race, a rate that ensures a multi-billion-dollar fund-raising effort by the year 2004.²⁸

And to what effect? Very little, say some scholars. Pivoting off the classic work of *The American Voter*, some researchers find only minimal effects during political campaigns.²⁹ Long-term dispositions like party identification, they argue, are unlikely to be changed by even a year's worth of bunting and hullabaloo. Econometricians draw the same conclusion but argue somewhat differently: a combination of the GNP and national unemployment statistics best predicts how the vote will turn out regardless of who is running or how well.³⁰ Morris Fiorina has a more elaborate model that features voters keeping a "running tally" of what repels and attracts them, a tally not likely to be disturbed by the sudden intervention of campaign politics.³¹ These "retrospective voters," Fiorina claims, have a much deeper and broader sense of political perspective; they are not mere manipulanda dancing at the end of the advertisers' strings but people who respond to real experiences they really feel.

A sophisticated set of studies done by Thomas Holbrook rethinks the entire matter of campaign effects.³² He finds that "national conditions" (war, the economy, civil unrest) affect some candidates while "campaign events" affect others, and that some contests, the 1996

presidential campaign, for example, are more heavily affected by the former than the latter.³³ It is often the case that incumbents are most influenced by national conditions and challengers by campaign events though that is not always the case. But for many observers this whole question of campaign effects is a quibble. If the campaign did not matter, they reason, candidates and their backers would not part with their money in such prodigious amounts. With millions-soon-billions invested in campaigns and with hundreds of thousands of citizens ready to donate their time and energy as well, only a fool could gainsay the importance of campaigns. The real tragedy of campaigns, such observers argue, is not that they have no effect but that they epitomize our most profound afflictions as a nation.

Take opinion polls. Surveys are now so plentiful that citizens pay more attention to what their neighbors think than to their leaders' thoughts. As I have argued elsewhere, with one-third of all news reports now mentioning poll results, the American people have become fascinated by "what they feel—even, in some cases, before they feel it."³⁴ This self-absorption is fostered by the thousands of professional surveyors who make their livings by polling, even though, as Everett Ladd reminds us, they were considerably off base in 1996.³⁵ These ambiguities have resulted in a hyper-rhetoric as the various practitioners pit their numbers against one another. Through such transactions, says Susan Herbst, public opinion is manufactured rather than assessed.³⁶ But the greater tragedy is that by concentrating on polling, a simulation, voters ignore concrete realities—such as welfare subsidies.

Although they seem to like polls, the American people do not like campaigns. Larry Bartels reports that their faith in elections has declined steadily since 1956 when more than 80 percent of poll respondents felt that elections were relevant to their lives (versus under 60 percent in 1996).³⁷ Margaret Scammell says that some of this dissatisfaction may be attributable to the increasing "professionalization" of political campaigns whereby marketing experts, not the candidates themselves, make the important decisions.³⁸ This trend has also diminished the role of the political parties. Working one's way through the party apparatus, building coalitions among its splinter groups,

cutting deals with regional constituencies, and smoking in back rooms have become quaint activities in a money-driven, electronic age. Researchers report that media-centered campaigns have resulted in split-ticketing as voters look to the media, not to the parties, for information and guidance.³⁹ With Independents now accounting for more than one-third of the U.S. electorate, the parties' roles are changing: they give birth to the candidates, or at least most of them, but they no longer discipline them (even Ronald Reagan avoided his party's platform in 1984). This trend is worrisome because, as Warren Miller notes, parties ensure a true dialectic during campaigns, an issue-orientation that forces candidates to take political stands.⁴⁰

A media-centered campaign, in contrast, ensures only that episodic events (such as a failed interview on *Larry King Live*) receive special attention. It also permits episodic candidates like Steve Forbes and Ross Perot to have equal footing with "résumé candidates" like George Bush and Al Gore. A media-centered campaign turns television personalities into power brokers, as when Walter Cronkite nearly persuaded Gerry Ford during a live convention interview to take the vice presidential spot on the Republican ticket in 1980, much to the horror of Ronald Reagan and his minions.⁴¹ When they do deal with issues, media-centered campaigns deal with issues du jour—gun registration today, the Middle East tomorrow—because the media have short attention spans and a hearty appetite for novelty. Reflecting on such trends, Carey McWilliams notes that citizens no longer get out of their houses much during a campaign as they consume the refracted, televised images created somewhere else for people in general. By emptying the public square, says McWilliams, the media produce an almost "totalitarian" effect, making politics a psychological and not a civic experience.⁴²

Studying campaign products is no more encouraging. Advertising is often scurrilous,⁴³ political debates are "counterfeit,"⁴⁴ empty and misleading visuals play to viewers' biases,⁴⁵ and campaign speech-making becomes bloated, building up people's expectations only to have them dashed by political reality.⁴⁶ These judgments are not simply matters of taste. Controlled studies by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar show that negative advertising can actually depress the popular vote.⁴⁷ Ostensibly, voters become so satiated by the op-

probrium candidates heap on one another that they quit the process entirely. A parallel effect has been discovered by Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who examined strategy-centered versus issue-based news coverage and found that the former makes politics seem gamelike to voters, resulting in decreased likelihood of voting.⁴⁸

Recent studies have also found a certain imperiousness in the media. Thomas Patterson shows that press coverage increasingly features the voice of the reporter rather than that of the candidate, a phenomenon demonstrated in the decreasing “sound bite” allotted the nation’s leaders by the media, and in their disinclination to cover party conventions.⁴⁹ In *Seducing America*, I detail the ways in which the media now fill their reportage with intimate details of the candidates’ personal lives (and with their presumed thoughts and feelings) rather than with more pressing issues of the day.⁵⁰ In the winter of 1998, for example, President Clinton’s alleged dalliances with intern Monica Lewinsky drove the historic meeting of Fidel Castro and Pope John Paul II off the front pages of all but the most stodgy newspapers. These decisions are not without their consequences. Studies show that people are increasingly likely to cite media sources when explaining their political perceptions, but this does not mean that media coverage motivates action.⁵¹ As Steven Rosenstone and Mark Hansen observe, declining voter turnout may be attributed in part to the electorate’s inability to connect to the media’s often surreal version of the campaign, a campaign that seems to have nothing to do with their health, safety, children, and pay stubs.⁵²

Viewed in the large, then, the modern political campaign seems a botch. Who could admire a process that diminishes a nation’s leaders even as it depresses its citizens? Increasingly, campaigns are run for the benefit of the well-paid professionals who make the ads and run the surveys and for the media personnel who preen noxiously for months on end. But that is only part of the story. We have also seen that campaigns broaden the nation’s dialogue, inform citizens and candidates alike, and join them in an important cultural ritual that makes nationhood a continuing possibility. Campaigns are both grand and troublesome and yet also mysterious. Their mysteries inspired this book.

WHAT MUST BE LEARNED ABOUT CAMPAIGNS?

Political campaigns in the United States are probably overstudied. From Theodore White's *Making of the President, 1960* to Roger Simon's *Showtime*, the election journal has become a publisher's staple.⁵³ Every four years, the advance checks are written in Manhattan for the definitive, behind-the-scenes explanations of why the presidential race turned out as it did. The facts reported in these narratives are sometimes hard to corroborate, but publishers have come to view the campaign as an elephant and their authors as blind men, and so there is usually truth enough for all. Indeed, for many people, the most definitive (or at least most delicious) account of the 1992 campaign was Anonymous's *Primary Colors*, proving that fact-checking and double-sourcing are not prerequisites for campaign analysis.⁵⁴

Also weighing in on campaigns are serious journalists, some of whom decry how the press is treated by politicians (e.g., *On Bended Knee* by Mark Hertsgaard) or how the media degrade themselves (e.g., *Breaking the News* by James Fallows). Other works focus on the personalities that run campaigns (e.g., Woodward's *The Choice: How Clinton Won*), the obscene amounts of money now spent on them (e.g., Corrado's *Paying for Presidents*), or why, despite their fundraising abilities, the parties are now in eclipse (e.g., Wattenberg's *The Decline of American Political Parties 1952–1992*). Still other authors use political campaigns to look deeper into the nation's life and times (e.g., *Running Scared: Why America's Politicians Campaign Too Much and Govern Too Little* by Anthony Stephen King and *See How They Ran* by Gil Troy). In addition, hard-nosed social scientists have developed superb mathematical techniques to ferret out polling trends. Works such as John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinions* and Michael DelliCarpini and Scott Keeter's *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* have made secondary analysis of survey data artful.⁵⁵

Is there anything left to learn? Only if we assume that what is said during a campaign matters, but that is not a common assumption. Members of the press are largely bored by the campaign speeches they hear and the handouts provided them by campaign staff. Too, reporters' hurried schedules root them in the moment, giving them

little time to put today's texts into historical context. Average citizens also feel superior to political discourse, assuming that they have the ability to sort out the wheat from the chaff without external guidance. Many scholars also do not know what to do with campaign texts and hence look to polling data for their truths. Numbers, they feel, are more substantial than metaphors, even though these numbers derive from survey questions arbitrarily asked of small groups of respondents nobody really knows. Polls tell us much about political responses but very little about political stimuli.

Happily, scholars have begun to correct these oversights. The work of Maxwell McCombs on media agenda-setting, Lynda Kaid on negative advertising, Doris Graber on campaign visuals, Kathleen Jamieson on political speech-making, and William Gamson on citizen dialogue has surveyed the campaign genre expertly.⁵⁶ My goals here are at once broader and narrower. I want to look at the sweep of discourse during the last fifty years, not at individual campaigns, but I want to do so from a single vantage point—word choice—and I want to do so voraciously, comprehensively. I want to put a number of hypotheses to the test and see which fail and which prove true. My hope is to offer a fresh perspective on campaigns by tracking what others have not bothered to track.

The stance I take toward campaigns is largely agnostic. I begin by assuming that nobody knows for sure what politicians say or why they say it or what makes campaigns special. I also assume that voters will never really be understood until they are listened to in their own words. I assume further that press coverage is no different today than it has ever been and that political advertising is a great and good thing—until data to the contrary are produced. For the sake of argument, I might also assume that political parties are still vibrant and that Ross Perot's success was an aberration. Or perhaps I should assume the opposite. Mostly, though, I will assume that making new assumptions about campaigns—and making no assumptions about campaigns—are equally heuristic. The great problem with campaigns is not that we know too little but that we know too much that may not be true.

If asked, for example, exactly how a political leader differs from, say, a religious prelate, how might one respond? The question seems

trivial and the answer obvious—they have fundamentally different jobs, they answer to vastly different authorities, their ambits of control differ. Yes, but how do they speak? Do they ever say the same things, even though one deals with the sacred and the other the profane? Are there times when a president must become a preacher, when a preacher must act empirically? When they speak of death do they say the same thing? Perhaps, but how do they speak when they speak of human privation? Human sexuality? Human purpose? School vouchers? Are preachers and presidents more alike today than they were twenty years ago? Forty years ago? Is an archbishop more likely to be seen standing next to the president on the campaign trail or on the White House balcony? Why are we so sure of the answer to this question?

The results reported here will ask such basic questions, sometimes re-inquiring into what others have found. Some researchers report, for example, that campaigns now have a narrower agenda than before but I find no evidence of such narrowing.⁵⁷ Others argue that political rhetoric has become more abstract, more fatuous over time, but I find a certain constancy on that score.⁵⁸ One scholar alleges that political parties are no longer featured in press reports but my database shows this to be a marginal effect at best.⁵⁹ There are more hypotheses that need rechecking: Was the rhetoric of the 1988 campaign especially dispiriting? No, I find. Are political ads as simplistic as some authorities claim?⁶⁰ Not according to my evidence. Have Democrats and Republicans lost their unique perspectives? Do they now speak a common language? No and no, I find. Was the “people’s debate” in Richmond, Virginia, in 1992 less partisan than traditional debates, as some have claimed?⁶¹ Not really, but that debate did differ in interesting ways from its forebears.

Details like these have their value, but this book is after bigger game. For example, what gives political language its special sound? How do we know a politician when we hear one? What are we doing when we are “being political” with one another. These, of course, are comparative questions: to know a politics one must also know an unpolitics. Having a large data base helps in this regard. Because of its capacity, it sometimes produces the unexpected result: politicians use a less focused style than the press, constantly seeking what Richard

Weaver has called the “spaciousness” needed for political compromise.⁶² The limits of politics are also seen when politicians and citizens are contrasted. While voters often declaim in colorful, castigatory ways, politicians are more encouraging but also more precise. But the inevitability of politics is best seen when politicians are compared to other public figures. They are, for example, more careful with their words than social protestors and religious leaders, navigating as they must the often tortuous routes of political compromise. The need for accommodation places a special “tax” on political language, depriving it of the pyrotechnic qualities seen in other venues. A comparison with business leaders yields another dimension: while highly optimistic, politicians are almost dour compared to corporate spokespersons. Because they perform their art under the klieg lights, and because they deal each day with matters of life and death, the nation’s political leaders do far less glad-handing than popular myth would suggest. Only a comparative analysis could establish that fact.

How has political language changed in the United States? There has been a dramatic drop in institutional assurance since 1948. Political candidates today speak with far less certainty than they did in the days of Harry Truman and Tom Dewey, they lose their argumentative focus more easily, and they are less dependent on partisan cues for their rhetorical impact. Interestingly, these patterns hold true for the press as well as the citizenry, as if the entire culture were caught up in swirling ambiguities. In addition, American politicians speak less optimistically today, perhaps because they do not have ready access to the language of mutuality so resonant in the 1940s and 1950s. This is true for reporters and citizens alike, suggesting a widespread social transformation. The campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s also bore the marks of their eras, with the old language of assumed community being replaced by a new language of skepticism and denial. The most recent campaigns are different still: they display the psychological talisman of their age—self-referentiality—and a corresponding language of time, not space, marks their postmodern condition. Deprived of the old verities, they also depend on (1) active and (2) technocratic language for their suasive force. While there are exceptions to these patterns, and while politicians, press, and people are

not always on the same page, the findings are powerful statistically and hence suggestive of a broad, enduring cultural story.

And so the logic of this book is comparative. To understand electoral pressures we must contrast campaigners to sitting presidents: What license comes with the presidency? Does residing in the Oval Office affect what one later says on the campaign trail? Is it better to be an incumbent or a challenger? A governor or a senator? And what of the press? Some allege that politicians and reporters now lie in the same bed, that their words are indistinguishable. I find no support for that claim. Instead, I find a persistent tension between them, with the media trying to stay “on topic” and political leaders trying to venture forth. Curiously, I also find that press reports are far more theoretical, more interpolative, than politicians’ texts, perhaps a function of the narrative burden the press assumes. I also find some intriguing media traditions: as a campaign moves from the nominating convention to election day, the language of commonality in news reports slips steadily (especially in recent campaigns), as if an old political story were being written again and again, or as if only one political story could be written.

Other comparative questions are raised by the findings reported here: Why is it that when American voters speak about political matters they sound different from both politicians and the press? What gives citizens their special voice and how would campaigns change if those qualities were better understood by the nation’s leaders? by the working press? Another comparative question asks, with the French author Buffon, is style the man? If so, is it worth it? Not according to my data. The more unique a politician’s language, the more likely he is to lose. Compared to the eighteen other political candidates studied here, Ross Perot’s language was highly distinct, as was Barry Goldwater’s, but their candidacies were troubled too. Most of the winning candidates—people like Dwight Eisenhower and George Bush, for example—were “average” in every measurable way. Does this mean that the American people are born centrists, that they use campaign rhetoric as a compass of suitability and feel good only when it points to plain?

This book looks at traditional campaign forums—conventions, debates, and political advertising—and raises new questions about

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them. Generally, my findings show that each serves an important purpose. Are convention acceptance speeches hoary and brocaded? They are, but we must ask why? What is it about a culture that produces politics by formula and why does that quality worry so many people—especially those in the press? What is it about re-saying old truths that gives people special pleasure, even in the middle of a feisty political campaign? Do debates serve an important function? They do. They establish neutral ground on which all candidates can stand, they discipline the candidates linguistically, and they open the candidates to a kind of introspection found in no other forum. Political ads perform less heroic services but they are less nasty than is generally believed. Indeed, they act as a kind of “electoral poetry,” letting candidates imagine an ideal political space. It is tempting to dismiss these pedestrian images but that seems unwise since a candidate who cannot imagine something wonderful is also unlikely to produce it once elected.

The findings reported in this book are not definitive. I paint in broad strokes here, teasing out questions lying beyond the reach of easy answers. While my database is large, my method of analysis is not without its problems. Because my database is large, getting the last word on individual political phenomena, on specific campaigns, is also not easy. But I trudge along nonetheless because political campaigns are too important to be ignored and too interesting to be studied solely in conventional ways. Language behavior is only a small part of a political campaign but it is a large part of the human condition. Political candidates are crafty about language but they are not crafty enough to record, store, analyze, and interpret a hundred thousand words in sixty seconds. The tools I have used here are able to do that, and so my trek does not seem hopeless.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this book, I will continue to reflect on why so many people find politics so disturbing. As the new millennium begins, few Americans hold their political leaders in high regard, fewer still can abide the press. Other institutions—education, the military, the

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courts, the church—are also being questioned but none so much as those that practice the political arts. It is as if the American people had suddenly become aware that negotiating power relations is a dirty business and that apportioning a society's goods and services takes not a saint but a sinner who bargains well with other sinners. In 1992, they got rid of a perfectly serviceable chief executive in deference to a young man who seemed far from perfect but both vigorous and photogenic. In 1996, they continued to prefer this young man over his rival, grouching all the while when doing so. They continued to grouse two years later when their amiable young man suddenly seemed younger (and more manly) than they had bargained for, which only goes to show that grouching, by now, had become their passion.

Campaigns also inspire passion because they are a parturition. Every four years, the American nation reconstitutes itself, thereby giving its citizens an opportunity to reflect on who they are and what they want to become. Their leaders help in that process, using the rhetorical arts to draft new plans and inspire new visions. Campaigns also involve a good deal of money laundering, ballot-box tampering, and horse-trading and that is what gives them their odor. But to reflect only on the shortcomings of campaigns seems cramped. If the American people agreed with one another on all matters and were preternaturally willing to share their bounties equally, there would be no need for politics. But they are not willing to do that and so I begin this book by offering a prayer: that when reflecting on campaigns we avoid feeling above politics or beyond politics or against politics or without politics. When it comes to politics—the science of social cooperation—the only acceptable prepositional injunction is to stand within politics, for politics stands at the center of us all.