

E L E V E N

The Election of 1992

IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION of 1992, a president once acclaimed as unbeatable was defeated by a candidate initially declared unelectable.

In March 1991, after the international coalition George Bush had assembled liberated Kuwait from Iraq in Operation Desert Storm, Bush had the highest approval rating of any modern president. According to the Gallup Poll, 89 percent—the highest in the nearly sixty-year history of that poll—approved of the way he was handling his job.¹ Many columnists and commentators declared him “unbeatable” in 1992: columnists Roland Evans and Robert Novak wrote, “There is something more intangible and mystical in the new relationship that now appears to bind the president and his country, affording him precious new strength,” and *Newsweek’s* preview of the Democrats’ prospects in 1992, headlined DREAM ON, DEMOCRATS, described the scenarios that the Democrats offered for their coming victory in 1992 as “fantasies.”² Since many Democrats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives had voted to give sanctions against Iraq additional time before using ground forces against Sadaam Hussein, some strategists and commentators thought the division between the parties on when to start the war might become a realigning issue. Republican Senator Phil Gramm of Texas called the Democrats a party of “appease and run liberals” without the ability to lead the world:

As you know, the Baath Party in Iraq and the Democratic Party in the United States are both working on their domestic agendas to make us forget the war. . . . Why is this [anti-force authorization] vote to undercut the president and to deny him the ability to lead the world so damaging to Democrats? Because it fits a pattern that is 20 years old . . . the pattern of Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis.³

By contrast with President Bush, the Democratic governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, had the lowest personal poll ratings of any recent major party

candidate for the presidency. Most voters first heard of him before the New Hampshire primary when he and his wife, Hillary, appeared together on the CBS program *60 Minutes* to refute tabloid stories of his alleged affair with a would-be nightclub entertainer named Gennifer Flowers. Throughout the primary campaign he was plagued by damaging stories concerning his alleged adultery, draft evasion, and marijuana use. Further, he was constantly accused of giving evasive, "slick" responses to questions about these charges. When he finally admitted that he had smoked marijuana during his days as a Rhodes Scholar, his follow-up line, "I didn't inhale," became as well known as the classic phrase of George Bush in 1988, "Read my lips." As a result, in the CBS/*New York Times* polls, Clinton was rated negatively by more than twice as many voters as had rated him positively, and most Americans thought he was telling them only what he thought they wanted to hear rather than what he actually believed.⁴

If momentum generated by the media was sufficient to sway voters, George Bush would have been reelected president of the United States. However, less than a year after he was declared unbeatable, President Bush was unable to win even 60 percent of the Republican vote in the New Hampshire primary against Pat Buchanan, a challenger who had never held elective office. And in November he received only 38 percent of the vote, one of the lowest totals ever received by an incumbent president. Moreover, this was the first time a Democratic challenger had beaten an elected incumbent Republican since 1932, when Franklin Roosevelt had defeated Herbert Hoover. In 1932, the country was in the midst of an historic economic crisis; unemployment was at 24 percent and no relief was in sight. In 1992, however, the economy was improving. Indeed, the election forecasts that had been based solely on the state of the economy predicted that Bush would win.

If voters had been unable to separate military leadership from domestic leadership, George Bush would have been reelected. A man who had been one of the youngest heroes of World War II, and the leader of a successful international effort in the Middle East, was defeated by a man who had avoided the draft and was thought by many Americans to have been dishonest about how and why he did so. Indeed, if voters had been unable to separate personal and political evaluations of candidates, Bill Clinton would never have received his party's nomination, let alone been elected president.

If voters had been unable to distinguish between current and future economic prospects, George Bush would have been reelected. Neither inflation nor unemployment was high in 1992, and a standard economic

model of presidential elections, based on changes in inflation and economic growth, predicted that President Bush would win comfortably with 57 percent of the vote.⁵ The economy *did* matter in 1992; in fact, a slogan on the wall in the Clinton campaign's "war room"—"The economy, stupid"—became so well known that it was used in campaigns throughout the world. That while the economy mattered traditional economic models could not predict the election emphasizes what an unusual year 1992 was. George Bush was not defeated because knee-jerk pocketbook voters voted against him, but because voters who were concerned about their long-term economic future no longer believed that the Republican party had a program for prosperity and for governing the country.

Finally, if voters had not remembered past campaigns, George Bush would have won reelection. In other words, if the "visceral power of ad pollution"—typified by the Willie Horton and "Read my lips" gambits in Bush's 1988 campaign—had been as effective as critics maintained, Bush would have been reelected. But in fact it proved harder to recycle an incumbent—even a heroic war leader—who had broken well-known promises than to promote a vice-president. The road to Washington is littered with the geniuses of campaigns past.

The dramatic turnaround in the ratings of President Bush is powerful confirmation that when people's beliefs about the main problems facing the president change the way they think about presidents and parties also changes. In 1992, voters reasoned that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that diplomatic and military skills were less important. They believed that the economy was the main problem facing the country and that trade was the most important international issue. Candidates in both parties had to try to demonstrate to voters that their policies were relevant to the new domestic and international contexts.

With the collapse of communism, the Republican record on defense was no longer as relevant as it had been and their domestic economic record was mixed at best. After twelve years, Reaganomics had not brought lower taxes, less government spending, or sustained growth. President Bush had to use his campaign to try to convince voters that his military and diplomatic skills could open markets in Japan, and that he would focus on domestic issues in his second term.

Bill Clinton successfully used his campaign to persuade voters that he would change the policies of his party, and that he was a different kind of Democrat, who would emphasize jobs and personal responsibility instead of the social programs of a traditional, "tax and spend" Democrat. Clinton's campaign had to provide such assurance to voters; the party's past record

and the acrimonious battles between the Democratic-controlled Congress and President Bush had also left voters unsure whether the party's policies were adequate, or even relevant, to the economic crisis they perceived.

In fact, the 1992 Democratic primaries became battles over *how* to change the party, not battles over whether or not the party needed to change. In 1984 the success of President Reagan in strengthening national defense and controlling inflation led to a primary battle over whether the Democratic party needed to change its ways. In 1992, the failures of Reaganomics and the collapse of the Soviet Union led some primary candidates to argue that the party should now return to its previous liberal path. However, instead of a rerun of 1984, the Democratic primary electorate responded mainly to the two Democrats, Bill Clinton and Paul Tsongas, who used their campaigns to tell voters about detailed economic plans and debated over which plan's variant of a new direction made most sense for the party.

Before Bill Clinton could persuade voters that he was a new kind of Democrat he had to provide voters enough additional details of his personal life so that the initial allegations of adultery and draft evasion were not the central features of his personal biography. He circumvented the nine-second sound-bite barrier of conventional network news to communicate about himself with voters by utilizing the alternate media channels and new formats. Once he had established his character, he defended his claim that he was a different kind of Democrat by using the campaign to detail the welfare reform and job creation policies he had implemented as governor. Finally, he reinforced his claim to being a new kind of Democrat by selecting a running mate, Senator Albert Gore, Jr., who was also perceived as a nontraditional Democrat.

Desert Storm

Polls conducted immediately after Operation Desert Storm that gave President Bush a record high job approval rating showed no increase in the salience of military issues, no increase in the public's confidence in the country's ability to win economic competitions with other countries, and no increase in public confidence in the president's leadership in economic matters either at home or abroad. Despite the intense focus by the media on the dangers of aggression by Iraq's Sadaam Hussein and the prospect of another oil crisis, the public did not place concerns about national security above concerns about a stagnant economy. In the CBS/*New York Times* poll taken immediately after the 100-hour ground war to liberate Kuwait,

more than half of all the respondents listed an economic concern as the major problem facing the country, while only 7 percent cited any international or military concern.

At the time that President Bush's military ratings and overall ratings were at a record high, only 42 percent of all respondents had a favorable impression of the job he was doing on the economy. Moreover, four out of five said they believed the economy was in recession, and 75 percent blamed the state of the economy on the policies of either George Bush or Ronald Reagan.⁶ The majority of respondents placed the lion's share of the blame on the policies of President Reagan; but Bush had made correcting the perceived excesses of the Reagan policies a cornerstone of his 1988 campaign with his talk of a "kinder, gentler nation" and his pledge, "I am the change."

The collective displays of buoyant patriotism following Operation Desert Storm did not put an end to pessimism about the future. In the afterglow of international acclaim for American leadership, when President Bush was receiving record ratings, only slightly more than one out of three Americans were optimistic about their collective future. Since 1984, CBS News/*New York Times* polls have asked the question, "Do you think the future for the next generation of Americans will be better, worse, or about the same as life today?" During the postwar elation, in the first week of March 1991, only 36 percent were optimistic, while 35 percent expected no change and 26 percent expected things to be worse for the next generation.⁷ Although these figures showed slightly greater optimism than in the previous year, they reflected, as well, a pessimism about the future that had been increasing throughout the four years of Ronald Reagan's second term.⁸

Expectations about the economic future were far lower than would have been expected on the basis of actual measures of the economy. For decades the Conference Board, a business think tank, and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research had been calculating indices of consumer confidence based on surveys which asked people their evaluations of local employment opportunities and economic activity, and their expectations about employment opportunities, family income, and economic activity in the future. For decades, both of these measures of consumer confidence had closely mirrored actual changes in employment opportunities and economic activity. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, however, consumer confidence dropped far below where it would have been based on the historic relationship with the aggregate predictors of consumer confidence. After the victorious 100-hour air war, moreover, there was only a

momentary upsurge in consumer confidence before it once again dropped far below the predicted level of consumer confidence, and stayed there for the rest of the Bush presidency.⁹

Potential voters had a pervasive sense of stagnation and of a slow economic decline. The long-term economic future looked uncertain compared to their own past, and they doubted whether their country would remain a world economic leader. Even in the immediate afterglow of victory, a plurality of Americans believed that the world's leading economic power in the next century would be Japan.¹⁰

In short, the media's prolonged and intensive focus on Operation Desert Storm did not distract citizens from concerns about their long-term economic future, and the prominent display of the president's military and diplomatic competence did not improve their evaluations of his economic performance. Despite his apparently solid position, President Bush's future troubles were evident at the moment of his greatest triumph, because the polls already indicated that voters did not see success in international affairs as proof of competence in managing the domestic economy. Operation Desert Storm failed to have a long-term effect on what voters were looking for in a president, nor did it have a long-term effect on what they saw when they looked at George Bush. By the next year, he had suffered the most precipitous drop in favor of any president in the history of the Gallup Poll.

Japan

If Operation Desert Storm was the high point of George Bush's career, the low point was his trip to Japan in January of 1992. The sluggish American economy was not producing jobs, the trade deficit with Japan was increasing, and there were challenges to the President's laissez-faire approach to international trade within his own party as well as from the Democrats. As the election year began, President Bush flew to Japan with a group of American business executives, including the leaders of the three major automobile manufacturing companies. The trip was intended to bring home trade agreements and to demonstrate that the president's international military and diplomatic skills were indeed relevant to producing domestic economic benefits.

The most disastrous moment of the trip occurred at a state dinner, when the tired, flu-stricken president suddenly became nauseous and vomited directly onto the Japanese prime minister before collapsing with his head in the lap of his appalled host. The president's illness launched a wave of

jokes, editorials, and metaphors. On *The Tonight Show*, for example, Johnny Carson joked:

President Bush is doing just fine. . . . If you had to look at Lee Iacocca while eating raw fish, you'd barf too. [Afterwards] the president got some more bad news: Japan also bars the import of Kaopectate. . . . At first they thought everyone at the dinner had the stomach flu because all the American auto executives were on their knees too. Turns out they were just begging.¹¹

The Bush trip had turned into a political nightmare, and the Carson monologue touched on all of the major problems the president encountered. The trip touched on public insecurity about whether America would be able to compete economically with Japan in the post-Cold War world. The perception that Americans were going hat in hand to Japan, with a president seeking economic help to stay in office, triggered a wave of editorials and cartoons about "begging." The very fact that polls taken in the wake of Operation Desert Storm would even ask questions about which country was economically stronger shows just how disorienting the collapse of the Soviet Union had been for Americans, after decades of political dialogue about containing communism and meeting the Communist challenge. Instead of a strong America negotiating with weaker countries, the popular image evolved into that of America "begging" for help from Japan. While Americans believed that they had better housing and health care than the Japanese, they believed that Japan had better schools, consumer products, and more advanced technology.¹²

The end of the Cold War, in other words, was changing the way Americans thought about the world and their own future in it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the election of non-Communist governments in Eastern Europe, a Cold War focus on military defense against communism was hardly salient. President Richard Nixon had electrified the country in 1971 when he announced he would visit "Red China," and his trip in early 1972 was followed attentively throughout the world, enhancing his standing. But twenty years later, in 1992, a comparable trip was a presidential mission seeking jobs and markets, rather than a mission for peace. For several years, a majority of Americans had said they were more concerned about future economic challenges from Japan than about military challenges, and the Bush trip was an attempt to show that he could deliver in the new arena.¹³

The trip was a failure both for the president and for the Republican party.

Immediately after its conclusion, 18 percent of the respondents in a CBS/*New York Times* poll said they considered the trip a success, while 63 percent said it was a failure. This was more than just an embarrassment for the president; it was a political failure from which the Republicans would not recover all year.

For twelve years the Republican party had benefited from its image as the party better suited to deal with international military and defense issues. When President Reagan took office in 1981, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis, this was an important partisan advantage: 55 percent of Americans thought defense spending should be increased, and only 8 percent thought it should be decreased. Those figures had almost reversed by 1992: in January only 8 percent of Americans thought defense spending should be increased while 45 percent thought it should be decreased.¹⁴

As noted in chapter 3, the Republican party's presidential success rested heavily on its perceived advantage in managing the national defense and controlling inflation. The shift of the party to Ronald Reagan during the 1980 primaries was issue-driven, based on commitments to control inflation by cutting government spending and to build a more aggressive and capable national defense. The crisis of 1992 for the Republicans was how to convince voters that they were as adept at post-Cold War economics as they had been at controlling inflation and fighting communism.

Despite an anemic economy, until President Bush's trip to Japan the Republicans had maintained their advantage over the Democrats. When pollsters asked people what they thought the most important problem facing the country was, and which party would be better at dealing with it, the Republican party came out ahead of the Democrats throughout the first three years of the Bush presidency.¹⁵ As the economy faltered, however, the gap narrowed and the parties were virtually even. Immediately after the president's trip to Japan, however, the gap on "better able to handle the country's most important problem" widened to the biggest Democratic advantage in more than a decade—42 to 29, a 13-point spread. This was as great as the lead the Republicans had held in 1980, when inflation was in double digits, the Soviets were in Afghanistan, and the hostages still in Teheran!

That a single calamitous trip could affect so many voters indicates how much was at stake in 1992, and how pervasive was a sense—as the primaries began—that something was deeply wrong with the country.

Read My Lips

Every campaign discussed in this book was framed by the voters' perceptions of the country and its place in the world. What was new in 1992 was that the campaign was framed not only by the state of the economy and the collapse of the Soviet Union but also by the 1988 campaign. If the GOP team that had helped George Bush win in 1988 was unable to recycle him in 1992, it was because voters remembered elements of that campaign so clearly and, in many cases, so bitterly. At the end of that campaign, voters were noticeably less satisfied than usual. Whereas in 1980 and 1984, half of all registered voters had said they were satisfied with the choice of candidates, in 1988 the percentage who said they were satisfied dropped to 33.¹⁶

Thus, in 1992 many voters were looking for the public debate they had found lacking in 1988. The 1988 campaign came at a time when a large percentage of the electorate was concerned about the future of the country.¹⁷ During his first term, President Reagan had successfully stemmed inflation and strengthened the country's military defenses. However, the public's unease about the future had increased dramatically during his second term. There was widespread concern about governmental services, particularly education, and about the increase in social problems such as drug addiction and homelessness. There was also a general opposition to tax increases to cover the mounting federal deficit.

When he accepted his party's nomination for president in 1988, George Bush could not and did not promise "four more years" of the same policies. Recognizing the public's fears about the future, their demands for better education, and for solutions to the nation's social problems, as well as their concerns about the harsher side of the 1980s, he promised "a kinder, gentler nation," a nation in which local civic and religious organizations of concerned citizens would provide "a thousand points of light." "America needs change and I am that change," he declared, vowing to be "the education president." He also made one of the strongest, starkest, and most memorable promises of any recent presidential campaign. With no qualifiers, disclaimers, or "wiggle room" of any sort, he said:

My opponent won't rule out raising taxes. But I will and the Congress will push me to raise taxes, and I'll say no, and they'll push, and I'll say no, and they'll push again. And all I can say to them is read my lips: No new taxes.¹⁸

Because Michael Dukakis reacted so weakly to the Willie Horton commercials, and in general did such a poor job of responding to Bush, the

debate over whether social problems could be addressed without cutting entitlement programs such as Social Security or cutting defense spending or raising taxes was never effectively joined.

In 1990, just two years after making his pledge, President Bush signed the largest single tax increase in the country's history. Faced with the growing federal deficit and a Democratic Congress unwilling to cut into entitlements and social programs, he agreed to a compromise that both surprised and infuriated many voters. After months of charges and countercharges between congressional Democrats and the president, a budget compromise was achieved: it enacted a large tax increase to help pay the costs of bailing out the failing savings and loan association banks (S&Ls) without making major cuts in programs favored by the Democrats or in popular entitlement programs.

As noted in chapter 4, voters are generally averse to making trade-offs, and they reacted with anger when the need for a compromise was forced upon them by the constraints of the growing federal budget deficit.¹⁹ The ratings of both the president and Congress dropped precipitously in the polls. Only 29 percent of the public thought the budget agreement had been fair, and there was an even split between those who thought the deficit could be reduced solely with spending cuts and those who thought both cuts and new taxes were needed. The proportion of registered voters who thought the country was "run by a few big interests" jumped from 57 percent in 1988 to 77 percent in 1990.²⁰ The average vote for incumbent members of Congress in both parties in 1990 dropped for the first time in any election since World War II, and three-quarters of all incumbents received fewer votes than in 1988.²¹

The public stalemate between Congress and the president was detrimental to both sides. The political and theoretical implication of this is clear: there are no white knights once the dirt hits the fan. That is, when two groups engage in a long series of charges and countercharges, most people lose track of the issues or principles behind the skirmishes; what might have started as good guys versus bad guys soon becomes nothing more than a mudslinging free-for-all in which everyone looks bad. Just as Watergate left many voters disillusioned after successive waves of complicated charges, many in 1990 saw the debate over the federal budget as a pointless cacophony rather than a sustained rally between two principled opponents. Thus, concerns about the future of the country and pessimism about the economy were joined by a bitterness about the performance of both President Bush and Congress during the 1990 budget negotiations.

The disillusionment with Washington did not abate after the budget bat-

tle had ended. In the summer of 1991, the Senate confirmation hearings on the nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court fueled yet another round of anger and disgust. For days, millions listened to a debate they considered embarrassing and unseemly over whether Judge Thomas had sexually harassed a former associate of his, Anita Hill. This was followed in the autumn with the explosion of public anger over revelations that many members of the House of Representatives had consistently overdrawn their accounts in the House-run bank. Although no public funds were involved—because overdrawn checks were covered by the deposits of fellow Representatives—the practice became a focus for public resentment of members of Congress as people with special privileges unwarranted by their collective performance. Incumbents who had written hundreds of bad checks were particularly liable to challenges in the primaries and in the general election. So acrimonious was the atmosphere that the largest number of members of Congress since the Depression chose to retire rather than risk another campaign.²²

Operation Desert Storm was but a brief interlude in the battle between the Democrats and Republicans about what approach to take in dealing with the federal budget deficit and the public's concerns over education, medical care, jobs, and the economy. The president continued to insist that the programs already in place were adequate to meet the challenge. But by April of 1992 fully 58 percent of the registered voters, including a plurality of Republicans, said the Bush administration was drifting without clear plans, and only 29 percent said the administration was moving carefully to develop its plans. Three years earlier, in April of 1989, these figures had been reversed; then, 61 percent thought the administration was moving carefully and only 31 percent believed it was drifting.

Throughout the primary season, public pessimism continued to grow. By May, Richard Wirthlin found that there was more concern about the direction in which the country was heading than at any time since 1980.²³ In the first Reagan administration, unemployment averaged higher than 9.5 percent for two years, and during 1982 the gross domestic product dropped by more than two percentage points. By contrast, in late 1991 and throughout 1992, unemployment was substantially lower, averaging near 7 percent, and the rate of growth rose to 2.2 percent from nearly zero in 1982.

In running for a second term, George Bush was in far deeper trouble than President Reagan had been when he ran for a second term, even though the downturn during President Bush's first term was far less severe than the downturn under President Reagan. By 1992 many voters had lost

confidence in the Republican approach to the economy; in 1984, however, voters still thought the party's approach might work. During his first term, George Bush had not been the change he had promised: his tax increase had not led to a smaller federal deficit or to a more prosperous country, and he had not demonstrated that his international Cold War skills could create jobs in America by opening markets in Japan.

Read My Plan

George Bush paid a price in 1992 for his inability to correct the failures and inequities of Reaganomics, and for his reversal on tax increases. Similarly, Democrats paid a price for the low poll ratings of Congress and popular concern about taxes and deficits. The anger over congressional pay raises, banking scandals, the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, and legislative gridlock confronted every candidate in every state. In other words, public faith in Reaganomics and George Bush collapsed at a time when there was no reservoir of faith in the Democrats, either.

The movements throughout the country for congressional term limitations were but one manifestation of the public's frustration with the performance of the national government. In April, after the names of members of Congress who had overdrawn their accounts at the House bank were released, only 15 percent of the electorate thought the political system needed only "minor changes"; 57 percent thought "fundamental changes" were needed, while 29 percent thought the system should be "completely rebuilt."

In 1976, many voters in the primaries had distrusted Democratic insiders because of the Democrats' support for busing and because the taint of Watergate affected everyone in Washington. In 1992, Democrats had to convince voters that they were not traditional "tax and spend" liberals from Washington who would raise taxes to start social programs of dubious potential at a time when the public was concerned about the slow but real decline in net wages.²⁴ In sum, the focus on wages and jobs accentuated voters' concern over whether Democrats could address the economy and not simply tackle social problems such as education and medical care.

The loss of faith in Reaganomics did not revive the voters' faith in liberalism, and the weaknesses of the Democratic party's establishment, so manifest in 1976 and 1984, were not obscured by the failures of Presidents Reagan and Bush. Throughout 1992, voters said their single greatest economic fear about a second term for George Bush was "gridlock" and "economic decline"; their greatest fear about a potential Democratic administration was increased taxes.²⁵

Democratic primary voters angry about gridlock, broken promises, and privileged politicians looked to cold economic plans rather than to angry candidates like Jerry Brown or to traditional liberals. The debate in New Hampshire and subsequent primaries was dominated by Paul Tsongas, a former senator from Massachusetts who had resigned from the Senate because of cancer, and Bill Clinton, the governor of Arkansas. In New Hampshire these two candidates garnered 60 percent of the vote, with Tsongas winning by 35 percent to Clinton's 26 percent. What distinguished them from the others was their ability to focus on concrete steps for dealing with the economy, to the point of publishing actual plans for voters to read. Few voters believed that candidates such as Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, Senator Robert Kerrey of Nebraska, or former Governor Edmund ("Jerry") Brown, Jr., of California had credible approaches to the economy. Harkin, for example, emphasized that the traditional liberalism of the past would still work; but votes for him, combined with the write-in votes for New York's Governor Mario Cuomo and consumer advocate Ralph Nader amounted to fewer than one-fifth of all the votes cast in New Hampshire.

Thousands of voters in New Hampshire obtained copies of the Tsongas and Clinton economic plans, and thousands more actually went to public libraries to read them. The Clinton plan was released, along with a television commercial promoting the plan, during the first week of January; in the next week Clinton moved from 16 percent and fourth place to 33 percent and first place in the polls. In the next six weeks, eighteen thousand people in New Hampshire telephoned Clinton headquarters to request a copy of the plan—the equivalent of more than 10 percent of the primary electorate.²⁶ This demonstrates, first, that some voters, some of the time, will take the time to read serious proposals. Second, and even more important, the attention paid to these plans, and the importance that Clinton's plan assumed during his general election campaign against George Bush and Ross Perot, tells us something significant about the kinds of cues voters use when they seek to assess a politician's policies.

The experience of the 1992 campaign suggests that whenever a candidate makes a clear and confident offer such as "Read my plan" or "Call my 800 number," voters perceive it as an important cue. A candidate who is willing to have his or her program examined, and thus expose him- or herself before the electorate, is giving people a chance to see his or her flaws. Furthermore, voters need not personally read the plan in order to believe in its content; they can assume that its meaning will emerge from public debate, as the candidate rebuts attacks on it by the other candidates and their

surrogates. If voters reasoned that what they had not read was credible, it was largely because other candidates seemed not to find fatal flaws in the plan.

The Clinton and Tsongas economic plans both focused on the need for more jobs in the private sector. The Tsongas plan emphasized the need to help businesses expand to create jobs; it included tax incentives and capital gains tax cuts to spur investment. The Clinton plan stressed the need to upgrade the training and skills of the work force; it focused on apprenticeship programs, education, and the need to keep jobs in the United States.

Blue-collar, high school-educated voters and white-collar, college-educated voters evaluated these plans differently. Blue-collar workers, who as a group had experienced a decline in wages and jobs during the course of the 1980s, were attracted to an emphasis on investment in human capital; white-collar workers were drawn to an emphasis on making more capital available to businesses. In every primary, Tsongas's support was much stronger among college graduates and professionals, and Clinton's was much stronger among blue-collar, high school-educated voters. In New Hampshire, for example, Tsongas beat Clinton 43 percent to 22 percent among college graduates, while Clinton carried high school graduates, 31 percent to 29 percent. In Maryland, Tsongas beat Clinton better than two to one among college graduates, while Clinton won among whites who had not attended college. In Florida, Clinton defeated Tsongas among high school-educated whites by three to one, while Tsongas beat Clinton, again, among college graduates.

The Tsongas-Clinton divide was demographically similar to the Hart-Mondale divide in 1984, but the debate also showed the extent to which voters had changed their reasoning about both politics and policy. By contrast to 1984, in 1992 the candidate who most attracted working-class and less-educated voters was a man who was not warmly supported by unions, who emphasized the importance of skills and the creation of jobs rather than increased spending on welfare and transfer payments, and who emphasized personal responsibility rather than government obligations.

"Slick Willie"

In the final months of 1991 and in January of 1992, Clinton moved well ahead of the other candidates in the New Hampshire polls. By late January he was almost at 40 percent in most polls, with Tsongas in the low 20s. At that point, Clinton was hit with a barrage of news stories about his alleged marital infidelity and his actions during the Vietnam War. For the re-

mainder of the primary season, and throughout the general election campaign, there was a succession of stories questioning his personal ethics, his drug use, and his marital fidelity: in short, his character.

On January 26, 1992—Super Bowl Sunday—Bill and Hillary Clinton appeared on *60 Minutes* to rebut charges that the Arkansas governor had had an affair with Gennifer Flowers. Clinton denied any affair with Flowers, but said that his marriage had weathered some troubles, and that people would “get the drift” of what he meant by that. The next week, a *Wall Street Journal* story said he had avoided serving in Vietnam by promising to join a Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) unit, which he never joined. One week later, a letter he had written in 1969 to Colonel Eugene Holmes, who had been in charge of the unit he did not join, was released to the press. In the letter, Clinton thanked the colonel for “saving him from the draft” and linked his decision not to openly resist the draft to a desire “to maintain my political viability within the system.” Later, two days before the April 7 New York primary, there were news stories that Clinton had, indeed, received an induction notice—which contradicted earlier statements he had made about the draft.²⁷

The week before the New York primary, Clinton, who had answered previous questions about marijuana use with denials that he had ever broken “any state’s” drug laws, was asked if he had ever tried marijuana in England, while he had been at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. In his answer he replied: “I never broke a state law . . . but when I was in England I experimented with marijuana a time or two, and I didn’t like it. I didn’t inhale it, and never tried it again.”²⁸ In addition there were stories about Clinton’s use of corporate jets while he was governor, stories about campaign contributions from companies accused of polluting the state of Arkansas, personal investments by the Clintons with S&L owners, and charges that Mrs. Clinton’s law firm had profited from work with the state government.

In New Hampshire, where Clinton had campaigned for months, fewer than 40 percent of registered Democrats thought he was telling the truth about his personal affairs.²⁹ After New Hampshire when Clinton began to pull ahead, his opponents began to argue that there might well be more revelations and that Clinton could not be trusted on his political programs any more than he could be believed about his personal life. A Tsongas television commercial in Illinois, for example, used the opening line, “Heard the latest?”; another said of Tsongas, “He tells the truth. He’s no Bill Clinton, that’s for sure.” Referring to his own pro-choice position, Tsongas quipped “I want women—no, that’s the other guy.” He also alluded to the Republicans’ propensity for negative advertising by asking ominously,

"How many people do you think the Republicans have out there investigating Bill Clinton?"³⁰ After the New York primary, which Clinton barely won after more draft charges and his "I didn't inhale" comment, Robert Casey, the Democratic governor of Pennsylvania, argued that the party needed to keep the convention open so that a better nominee could be found. Jerry Brown then urged voters to support him just to keep the nomination open until a new nominee could be found: "Voting for Clinton is like taking a ticket on the Titanic. . . . It sounds good. It looks good. The food is fine. But it's going under water."³¹

As a result of all the stories about Clinton's character, and the stories about his allegedly partial, incomplete, or lawyerly answers to the charges, Robin Toner wrote in the *New York Times* that Clinton had gone from "inevitable to impossible to inevitable but doomed." That is, his nomination seemed inevitable before the tabloid charges, impossible after they appeared, and then inevitable again although doomed after he defeated Tsongas because no one believed he could beat Bush.³² Throughout the primaries, a majority of Democrats said, both in exit polls and national surveys, that they wanted to see new candidates in the race.³³ Even though Clinton had virtually clinched the nomination by late March, a majority of Democratic voters continued to want new candidates in the race. The only other remaining candidate, Jerry Brown, was so unpopular that his main argument was that people should vote for him to keep the nomination at the convention open.

Most voters did not believe that Clinton's all-but-admitted adultery and alleged evasion of the draft disqualified him from the presidency. While between 10 and 20 percent of voters thought the charges were serious, far more important was the inference by many more from the way he handled the charges that he was insincere and overly political.³⁴ At the end of the primaries, 62 percent thought he said "what he thinks voters want to hear," while only 28 percent of registered voters thought he was a person who "says what he believes most of the time."³⁵ Phrases such as "I didn't inhale" and "maintain my viability" were interpreted as evidence that he was an ambitious politician who would say anything and who could not be trusted personally.³⁶ When *Washington Post* reporters Dan Balz and David Broder conducted a focus group in Chicago, participants described Clinton with words such as "slick," "slimy," and "cunning." They also compared him to television evangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker.³⁷

Typically, voters have particular concerns about the character of political consensus builders; they focus on whether they are sincere, on whether their support for a cause represents a genuine personal commitment or

merely a campaign tactic.³⁸ When a candidate is both a consensus builder and a person whose character is being questioned, the concern becomes even more serious. As the 1992 campaign suggests, when there is anger and resentment at the entire political system, the voters' concerns with sincerity will be even more salient.

Voters had inferred (erroneously, as it happened) from the draft evasion stories that Clinton had led a life of privilege. His personal history—successful avoidance of the draft during the Vietnam War, a Rhodes Scholarship, attendance at Yale Law School—suggested that he had been born to a life of social connections and privilege. This misperception raised suspicions about whether he had any genuine concern for average people or whether he was just posturing.

The Man from Hope

When Bill Clinton formally clinched his party's nomination on June 2 with victories in five states, including California, Ohio, and New Jersey, he had been badly damaged by the primary process.³⁹ Even though he was the first Democratic candidate to win primaries in all ten of the largest states, his candidacy was considered doomed by many commentators. Jay Leno, for example, suggested that when Clinton had a call-in show, the number should be "Rescue 911."⁴⁰ The undeclared candidacy of Ross Perot was gaining momentum, and Clinton was third in most of the national polls behind Perot and Bush. In fact, in California he could not even carry his own party against Ross Perot: in the June 2 exit polls, he lost a trial heat to Perot among voters in the California Democratic primary.⁴¹ In a *Newsweek*/Gallup poll, 30 percent of Democrats thought the Democratic convention should dump Clinton and find another candidate.⁴²

When shown television commercials of Clinton discussing his programs, potential voters in focus groups reacted derisively and discounted most of what he said as slick propaganda.⁴³ Yet only six weeks later, Clinton was rising so quickly in the polls that Ross Perot dropped out of the race and attributed his decision, in part, to a revitalized Democratic party.

If Clinton won the nomination by talking about the economy, he overcame the damage he had sustained in the primaries by talking about himself, connecting the issues with which he was concerned to his own personal history. To counter the impression that many people had of him as a privileged, slick, adulterous draft dodger, albeit a smart one with a plan for the economy, he provided voters with a fuller portrait of himself by giving the public a sense of his past.

Clinton's comeback would have not been possible ten years earlier be-

cause it depended upon new television networks such as MTV, Fox, and CNN, and on specific types of programs and formats, particularly viewer call-in shows, that had only recently risen in prominence. In the 1980s, as the traditional network news programs were trimming politicians' statements to mere nine-second sound bites, and dropping on-air interviews with real citizens in favor of poll reports, talk shows burgeoned on both radio and television. Clinton made the most of these new outlets, thus giving potential voters a longer look at him, and a chance to go beyond their preconceptions and misconceptions about him.⁴⁴

Immediately after he had secured the nomination Clinton began to make guest appearances not only on the traditional television programs on which politicians had been seen for decades, but also on entertainment shows. He appeared on the late-night *Arsenio Hall Show* wearing sunglasses and playing the saxophone; he appeared on the NBC *Today* show and CBS *This Morning* answering hours of questions called in by viewers. He appeared on CNN's *Larry King Live* and on an MTV "Rock the Vote" special program answering questions from its youthful host, Tabitha Soren, and an audience aged eighteen to twenty-five.

Most commentators saw this strategy as an act of desperation, and most un-presidential, as well. Many news analysts said that appearing on the talk shows was Clinton's way of avoiding hard questions from professional journalists, and they were even more caustic about his *Arsenio Hall* appearance. The *New York Times*' columnist Tom Wicker thought that appearance was exactly what a man considered to have been a swinger didn't need: "This is undignified. . . . The association with jazz music, the dark shades and the Arsenio Hall Show, I don't think that is an asset." David Gergen, a MacNeil-Lehrer commentator and editor-at-large for *US News and World Report*, was even more critical: "The difference in the gap between Arsenio Hall and talking to someone like [British Prime Minister] John Major, to me, is so dramatic, it suggests that he doesn't have a handle on what it takes to be President."⁴⁵

Just as traditionalists thought it was un-presidential in 1948 when the Republican candidate, Harold Stassen, participated in a question-and-answer session during the Republican primaries and shook hands with the audience afterward, commentators such as Wicker and Gergen thought Clinton was making a serious mistake.⁴⁶ But by appearing on programs such as *Arsenio Hall* and MTV's "Rock the Vote," Clinton was simply going where the voters were, for many of them did not regularly watch evening newscasts or the Sunday morning interview programs. Indeed, it turned out that in 1992 nearly half the electorate watched call-in shows on televi-

sion.⁴⁷ What was more important, these programs afforded Clinton a greater chance than traditional news outlets would have to discuss issues. On the call-in shows, more of the questions were about issues and fewer concerned personal charges than in the more traditional formats.⁴⁸

Just as significantly for Clinton, the interview programs and call-ins gave him the opportunity to give longer answers. The focus groups organized by his own campaign had shown that short sound bites of Clinton speaking were insufficient to overcome the people's preexisting beliefs about him. However, viewers who saw him talking at length, as well as those who saw him in situations where traditional politicians had seldom appeared, often noticed that there was something more to Clinton than they had expected. In many cases, this led then to a reassessment of his qualifications as a candidate.

It was missing the point, then, to assume that by soliciting questions from call-in viewers Clinton was trying to duck harder questions from professional journalists. The radio and television call-in sessions were *not* a way to evade interviews with Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw or Peter Jennings. They gave people who were unable to assess a candidate on the basis of nine-second sound bites a more satisfying opportunity to learn about him. They also gave Clinton an alternative to "eating tamales," that is, to visiting people informally and being judged mainly on how comfortable he appeared to be while eating their ethnic foods. They gave viewers far more information about issues than such traditional campaign rituals—and more, in fact, than some of the interviews on the regular news programs.

After two weeks of talk show appearances, Clinton had made major progress. On May 30, when voters were asked whether each of the candidates was "telling enough about where he stands on the issues for you to judge what he might do if he won the presidential election," 33 percent thought Bush, who had no plan, was telling enough, 32 percent thought Clinton, who did have a plan, was telling enough, and 15 percent thought Perot, who said he would soon present a plan, was telling enough. Over the next three weeks, Clinton was ignored by the traditional networks, which devoted most of their coverage to Perot, who had just hired Ed Rollins, Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign manager, and Hamilton Jordan, Jimmy Carter's campaign manager in 1976 and 1980, and thus become the center of a media firestorm. At the same time, however, using talk shows and alternative settings, Clinton made major strides in informing voters about his plan. In mid-June while 22 percent thought Perot was telling enough, and 32 percent thought Bush was telling enough, 43 percent now thought Bill Clinton was telling enough.⁴⁹

On the evening of July 16 at the Democratic national convention, the biographical film shown about Clinton, "The Man from Hope," successfully brought forward an important part of Clinton's life story: he had been born poor in the small town of Hope, Arkansas, had an alcoholic stepfather and a brother who later had drug problems, and had attended college on scholarships. This film, and Clinton's subsequent acceptance speech, directly challenged inferences about him that voters had drawn from the earlier stories, which had erroneously led them to conclude that Clinton had led a life of privilege.

After the Democratic convention, 84 percent of the public said they thought Bill Clinton had worked his way up from humble origins, 62 percent said they thought he shared the values of most Americans, and approximately half said they thought he was telling them enough about his stands on issues for them to know what he would do in office.⁵⁰ With a more complete biographical picture of Clinton, people were more willing to listen to him talk about issues, more willing to decide whether his plans for the economy were better than the other candidates'.

Mud, as East Europeans learned under communism, makes good paint: once a person is smeared with it, it is hard to wash off, regardless of whether the charges are valid. Thus, new information did not actually erase old information about Clinton; after the convention, people did not forget the allegations of Clinton's draft evasion or adultery or "I didn't inhale." Throughout the campaign, more than half the public thought he was "telling people what he thought they wanted to hear, not what he believed." From March until October, a near-constant 20 percent said they were disturbed by his draft evasion, and by a margin of more than two to one, voters said they were not confident he had the experience to deal with a difficult international crisis.⁵¹

Still, people learned enough about Clinton from the campaign to judge him positively on the basis of his economic plan and his political character; they were able to move from the personal to the political. This evolution in voters' perceptions of Clinton suggests that the best way to fight charges or problems against a candidate's character during a campaign is to provide *additional* information about *other* aspects of his or her character, in order to give voters the fullest possible picture. Clinton did not do away with voters' concerns about his alleged adultery, draft evasion, or his tendency to try to please everyone. But he did convince many of them that he could nonetheless bring about change and that his plan was worth trying. Regardless of whether or not he had inhaled, he had a plan.

By the summer of 1992, 92 percent of those questioned by one CBS/*New*

York Times poll said they thought the country needed real change. During the course of the campaign, at least 40 percent thought Clinton would make the changes the country needed. The number who thought George Bush could do so was only 24 percent.⁵²

A New Kind of Democrat

The Clinton campaign sought to convince voters that the most telling distinction between Clinton and Bush was "change versus 'more of the same.'" People felt major change was needed, and the Clinton campaign sought to remind voters that George Bush, who failed to make the changes he had promised in 1988, could only offer "more of the same." Indeed the much-cited sign on the wall of the "war room" in Clinton campaign headquarters had "change versus more of the same" as the top line, followed by "the economy, stupid" and "don't forget health care."

The distinction the Bush campaign sought to emphasize was "trust versus taxes." George Bush was a leader who could be trusted, while Bill Clinton would only raise taxes. This meant, in effect, that Bush had to convince the public that his second term would be different from his first term, when he had broken his "no new taxes pledge" and ignored domestic concerns. In short, he had to convince people that "this time I really mean it" and "now I really care." Given the difficulty of raising his own ratings, a good part of his campaign was devoted to lowering ratings of Clinton and the Democratic party.⁵³ As it turned out, twelve of the fifteen television commercials run by the Bush campaign were negative, and nine of those twelve were about Bill Clinton's character. By contrast, eleven of twenty-four commercials run by Clinton were negative, and eight of the eleven focused on the president's record and utilized news footage.⁵⁴

Maintaining the focus on a simple, clear distinction between "change versus more of the same" was only possible because the Clinton campaign neutralized attacks by the Bush campaign that had attempted to turn the debate from economic plans and toward taxes or international affairs, or to character flaws that would discredit Clinton's ability to bring about change.

The Bush attack on Clinton borrowed heavily from the recent British election, in which the Conservative prime minister, John Major, had won an eleventh-hour, come-from-behind victory over the Labour party.⁵⁵ The Bush offensive focused on the argument that Clinton was radical, that the Democratic party was a party of minorities and losers, and thus that any changes the Democrats made would be the wrong changes for the majority of Americans.

The Democratic convention, and the selection of Senator Al Gore as vice presidential candidate, however, had convinced the public that Bill Clinton was a "new kind of Democrat," and the Republican campaign proved unable to change that impression. The week after the Democratic convention, when the CBS/*New York Times* poll asked potential voters whether Bill Clinton and Al Gore were "different from Democratic candidates in previous years" or were "typical Democrats," 44 percent thought Clinton and Gore were a "new kind of Democrat." After the Republican convention, the number dropped to 41 percent, but in October it was up to 48 percent. At no time during the election did a plurality of Independents and Republicans ever think of Clinton as another Mondale or Dukakis.

In September the Bush campaign resorted to implying that Clinton was a pawn of the former Soviet Union because he had visited Moscow while a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford; these attempts resulted in making Bush a target of some ridicule.⁵⁶ That these attacks on Clinton were viewed as necessary at all was a testament to the ability of the Clinton campaign to keep the focus clearly on the distinction they sought to emphasize: "change versus more of the same," by negating all the peripheral attacks designed to shift the focus to trust or taxes or personal character.

When Bush attacked Clinton as a draft dodger and a possible dupe of Moscow, Ronald Reagan's two-term head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe, endorsed Clinton and said that he was confident of Clinton's ability to defend the country and provide continuity in foreign policy. With the Cold War at an end, Admiral Crowe's endorsement on September 20 was enough to keep the issues of foreign policy, defense, and fitness to serve as Commander-in-Chief from becoming central during the rest of the campaign.

Clinton had an economic plan, and a large part of the electorate knew of it and believed that he had told them what he would do if elected. Campaign advertisements featured nine Nobel laureates in economics as well as hundreds of business executives from prominent corporations who also endorsed the plan. Moreover, these business executives were not "losers" but the heads of some of the most successful high-technology firms in the country, such as Apple Computers and Hewlett-Packard. The percentage of the population who thought the Clinton plan was worth trying did not decline.⁵⁷

Most important, Clinton's campaign advertising featured the candidate's record on welfare reform. During his tenure as governor of Arkansas, Clinton had developed a training program for mothers on welfare that had succeeded in moving seventeen thousand women off the welfare rolls and

into jobs. Against millions of unemployed nationally, seventeen thousand was a minuscule number, but the fact that Clinton had promoted a successful welfare reform provided an important source of reassurance that he was a "new kind of Democrat."⁵⁸ A successful record on welfare reform and an often-stated philosophy that welfare was a second chance and not a way of life made it difficult for the Bush campaign to assert that Bill Clinton was out of touch with the middle class.⁵⁹

Clinton's poll ratings began to rise even before the Democratic convention, when he selected Senator Albert Gore, Jr., of Tennessee as his running mate. Clinton's choice of Gore was a distinct departure from the usual practice of balancing a Northerner with a Southerner, a liberal with a moderate, a younger with an older person, or a Catholic with a Protestant. Clinton and Gore were both young, moderate, Baptist, and from border states. The powerful popular reaction to the two of them as young, intelligent, and vigorous, as well as the widespread stories about people driving hours to see their bus tour appearances, suggests an important cognitive explanation for Gore's importance to the ticket. A ticket of complementary, "balanced" candidates requires a difficult process of "averaging" to arrive at its expected value: What, after all, does a Bush plus a Quayle equal? Or a Kennedy plus a Johnson? Clinton and Gore, by contrast, were so similar that such a calculation was unnecessary; and the ticket psychologically easier to understand. Indeed, if this hypothesis is correct, the presence of Gore, who served in Vietnam, had a wife and four children, and was such a straight arrow that most of the press described him as positively square, may have lessened Clinton's problems of draft evasion and marital infidelity by concentrating the voters' attention on the common features of the two.

Ross Perot

Well before Bill Clinton had succeeded in reintroducing himself to the public through the alternative television media, Ross Perot had become a leading contender for the presidency through talk shows. Three days after the New Hampshire primary, at a time when the economy was sluggish, and more than half of all Americans said they did not have a favorable opinion of any of the candidates, Perot, a feisty, self-satisfied Texas billionaire, appeared on *Larry King Live*. In response to questions from King, Perot said he would consider running for President if volunteers placed his name on the ballot in all fifty states. He made this statement two weeks before the *New York Times* even reported it, and a month before it was mentioned in the *Washington Post*. But before these newspapers or any of the

television networks gave Perot serious coverage, word of his offer to run for president had spread throughout the country as viewers who had seen the CNN interview gave their reactions to it on local-radio talk shows.⁶⁰

The Perot phenomenon illustrates both the power of the new media and the pervasive unease the voters felt in 1992 with the two major political parties and with politics as usual. The initial enthusiasm for Perot is a classic example of low-information infatuation.⁶¹ Perot excited interest because he engendered hope in people who were disenchanted with both Clinton and Bush. From the few bits of information they had about him, people could form an image that was a marked contrast with Bush or Clinton; Perot was a billionaire with plain tastes and a genius for common-sense aphorisms, who had led an effort to reform public education in Texas and who had pulled off a rescue of American employees from an Iranian prison—a feat that had been the subject of a best-selling book and a television miniseries.

By late March, Perot's vote shares were higher than 20 percent in national polls in hypothetical three-way races with Bush and Clinton. In June, Clinton was in third place in the CBS/*New York Times* preference poll and Perot was within one point of an incumbent president: the actual results were Bush, 34 percent; Perot, 33 percent; and Clinton, 26 percent.

Analyzing the support for Perot, Martin Wattenberg found that with the exception of African Americans, Perot's support was nearly uniform across demographic, attitudinal, and ideological groups. The single indicator that most predicted support for Perot was low attachment to either of the two major political parties: Perot attracted people unhappy with both Democrats and Republicans, including Democrats and Republicans unattracted to their party's actual candidates.⁶²

In 1980, John Anderson had been the beneficiary of low-information infatuation after he announced his candidacy, but his national support never approached even half that of Perot's, and Anderson eventually ended the campaign with only 7 percent support. Perot suddenly withdrew in July, bewildering many of his supporters, and subsequently gave several different reasons for his decision. That he could reenter the race and finish as the preferred choice of 19 percent of the public is further testament to what President Bush called a "weird, weird" year. That millions of Americans willingly watched his thirty-minute "infomercials" (paid television appearances in which the candidate presented viewers with a blizzard of economic data in the form of charts, graphs, and statistical tables) is but one more piece of evidence of the degree to which Americans craved politi-

cal solutions in 1992, and how much attention they were willing to give to even relatively dry political presentations.

An Engrossing Campaign

In 1992, Bill Clinton was slick; George Bush was distant, out of touch, and insensitive; and Ross Perot was bizarre. Yet voters were more engrossed in the election of 1992 than in any recent presidential election. Even the decline in voter turnout was reversed: after dropping steadily since 1960, it increased by almost 5 percent in 1992 over 1988.

The voters' level of attention to the campaign increased even more. Since 1980, every CBS/*New York Times* poll during election years has asked, "How much attention have you been able to pay to the presidential campaign—a lot, some, not much, or no attention so far?" The level of attentiveness, gauged by the percentage of respondents who said they were paying a lot of attention to the campaign, was higher in 1992 than in any of the earlier elections, and was higher in the summer of 1992 than in the last week of any of the other elections. In 1980, in a three-way election that ushered in the Reagan-Bush era and also gave control of the Senate to the Republicans, the percentage of the electorate that said it paid a lot of attention to the campaign stayed below 40 percent until the final week of the campaign, when it rose to 50 percent. In 1984 and 1988, the proportion paying a great deal of attention only passed 40 percent in the last week, when it peaked at 45 percent.

In 1992, throughout June, July, and August, the proportion of the electorate that said they were paying a lot of attention to the election was higher than 40 percent. In September it was above 50 percent, in October higher than 60 percent, and in the final week two out of every three registered voters were heedful of the election.⁶³ In short, voters paid as much attention to the 1992 election during the summer as they typically pay in the campaign's final weeks, and they paid more attention during the last month than they usually pay during the final days.

Clearly, some of this extra attention was stimulated by heavier campaign expenditures, since Ross Perot spent as much on his on-again-off-again campaign as did the other two candidates combined. But the voters' level of attentiveness was still higher than in other years when Perot dropped out on July 16, and when the Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominees went on a bus tour through America's small towns during July and August. Voters were more attentive in 1992 than they had been in any

election year since at least 1980, when CBS began collecting this data, because they were so concerned about the future of their country.

There were three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate in 1992, and these also attracted unusually large audiences. Moreover, while in previous years the audience was smaller for the final debate, in 1992 the size of the audience increased for each successive presidential debate—even though the last one began at 4 P.M. on the West Coast. CBS did not broadcast the final debate because of a prior commitment to air one of the games of the major league baseball playoffs and even then, the debate outdrew the playoff games, resulting in CBS coming in third behind ABC and NBC in audience share for that time slot.⁶⁴

Finally, it should be noted that this attentiveness increased without campaign reforms that might have limited negative advertising, because voters, recalling 1988 and seeking more serious discussion than had occurred four years earlier, were willing to devote an unprecedented amount of time to following the presidential campaign of 1992.

Conclusion

Campaigns do make a difference. As Vice President Quayle said of Bill Clinton in his concession speech, "If he runs the country as well as he ran his campaign, we'll be all right."⁶⁵ Bill Clinton overcame voters' doubts about his personal character by giving them sufficient reasons to judge him instead by his political character. He won the Democratic primary by convincing a majority of Democrats that his plan offered them more than did Paul Tsongas's, and forced the issue by challenging Tsongas to explain how his plan would move the country beyond its current economic crisis, which, despite his personal credibility, Tsongas could not do.⁶⁶ He then used the Democratic convention movingly to tell his extraordinary life story and to overcome the misperception that he had been born to privilege. In his choice for a running mate, he demonstrated that he *was* indeed a new kind of Democrat. He used his record of commitment to welfare reform to rebut charges that he was just another "tax and spend" Democrat.

What may be most striking about the presidential campaign of 1992, however, is how different it was from the campaign of 1976. In the aftermath of Watergate, nearly half of all Americans responding to one poll said that they thought the problems in Washington could best be solved by a morally upright candidate who would restore moral values to government, rather than by enacting new programs.⁶⁷ Sixteen years later, American voters were so concerned about economic and social conditions in the country, and so angry with "politics as usual," that they were ready

to listen to a person with a detailed plan despite their serious doubts about his character and his evasiveness. And they were so troubled by the two major political parties that they were willing to give a chance to a man who had never worked a day in government and who had made five billion dollars in the private sector mainly from government contracts.

That voters in 1992 listened to so many debates, “infomercials,” and discussions of plans proves they will reason about the content of governmental policies even at a time when their dominant emotion is anger. In addition to anger and a positive desire to throw the bums out—as evidenced by the public response to the House of Representatives’ bank scandal, or by the millions of wet tea bags the voters sent their Representatives to protest the congressional pay raise—in the end voters did not vote for the angriest candidates, Jerry Brown and Pat Buchanan. They moved beyond their anger and their thirst for retribution and thought, instead, about the future of their country.