

F O U R

Going beyond the Data: Evidence and Inference in Voting

JEROME BRUNER once observed that the most characteristic thing about mental life is that "one constantly goes beyond the information given."¹ People go beyond the data they already have by using information shortcuts, cues that enable them to call on beliefs about people and institutions from which they can generate scenarios, or "scripts," as they are called in psychology. They absorb cues and then flesh out a scenario with their "default values," the information we assume to be associated with the cue in the absence of contradictory information about the specific situation.² While studying under Bruner, the sociologist Harold Garfinkel demonstrated how flexible and creative people can be in imagining a person and his probable behavior from a simple set of traits or demographic characteristics. Taking twelve traits from the standard psychological inventories—traits with positive and negative poles, such as energetic and lazy, honest and dishonest—Garfinkel selected combinations of positive and negative traits at random and then asked subjects to describe a person who had all of them. The result was dramatic: no matter how unlikely the combinations of traits, the subjects could *always* imagine people to fit them; not one subject complained of an impossible combination of traits. As Bruner noted of this work, "Perhaps there *can* be every kind of person. Or perhaps the better way to say it is that we can create hypotheses that will accommodate virtually anything we encounter."³

The cognitive psychology literature suggests that there are two modes of information processing, the statistical and the clinical, each with its own standards of evidence and truth. The statistical mode is concerned with logic and weighs evidence. The clinical mode is concerned with fitting information together and assembling a causal narrative. Anthony Downs's approach to decision making leads to neo-Bayesian statistics in which pieces of new and old evidence are combined in proportion to their information content. But this idea takes no account of how content is weighted.

The cognitive research suggests that a small amount of new information is usually given more weight than a large amount of old information whenever the new information is personal and the old information is abstract and hard to fit into a narrative. It also suggests that a small amount of old information may receive more weight than a large amount of new information in at least three situations: when the old information becomes more important in a new context, when the old information is easier to incorporate, or when the old information is easier to use in comparing candidates.⁴

Whereas the statistical mode asks whether an argument is persuasive, the clinical approach asks whether a story is lifelike, whether the pieces form a coherent narrative. Assembling, assessing, and incorporating information takes time and is a selective, hence creative, process. We assemble when we think, and the more we are stimulated, the more we think, computing on the fly, adjusting our categories and the data we use dynamically.⁵ When we assemble our information, we don't use all we know at one time. The cognitive research which explains how narratives are assembled includes studies that focus on the representativeness, availability, and framing of information. We incorporate information that forms a narrative, which we assess by the clinical equivalent of "goodness of fit" testing, judgment by representativeness. We incorporate information which fits with our point of view, or frame, and we incorporate information which we have used recently—that is, information which is available.

From the research on cognition, we can draw several principles that help explain how voters make evaluations and choices. The findings about how people assemble information into narratives lead to a Gresham's law of information: just as the original Gresham's law was that bad money drives good money out of circulation, in campaigns, small amounts of new personal information can dominate large amounts of old impersonal information, permitting hitherto unknown candidates to surge ahead of better-known candidates.

The research on cognition has also uncovered calculation aids or shortcuts that people use when they estimate probabilities and compare different mixes of gains and losses. The effects of calculation aids, which I call pseudocertainty effects, help explain why virtually unknown candidates can be evaluated as highly as they sometimes are.

When people make choices between candidates, particularly in primaries, they "know" many things about the candidates from the information they obtain and the meaning they ascribe to it from their default values. They do not, however, have in mind the same characteristics for

each candidate. This disparity means that the way voters evaluate candidates is affected by the ways in which they formulate comparisons of them. When people compare candidates on the differences that are most obvious, rather than those that are most important, they are conducting the equivalent of a Drunkard's Search, looking for their lost car keys under the streetlight only because it is easier to search there.⁶ This search strategy reflects the ways in which voters formulate their choices. And the fact that people use this strategy explains much about the ways in which incumbents and front-runners frame the array of choices facing voters.

Representativeness

When millions of voters cast ballots for candidates of whom they knew nothing a few weeks prior to a primary, and when people judge a candidate's record on the basis of campaign appearances, they are assessing past or future political performance on the basis of assessments of how well a candidate fits their scenarios or scripts. Such goodness-of-fit assessments involve the use of the "representativeness" heuristic.⁷ Representativeness is a heuristic, a "rule of thumb," for judging the likelihood that a person will be a particular kind of person by how similar he or she is to the stereotype of that kind of person. In other words, if we judge how likely it is that a candidate will "do the right thing" by how well he or she fits our ideas about what kind of person does the right thing, rather than by considering how likely it is that a person with a particular record would do the right thing, we are judging with the representativeness heuristic. In the case of voting behavior, the most critical use of this heuristic involves projecting from a personal assessment of a candidate to an assessment of what kind of leader he was in previous offices or to what kind of president he will be in the future.

When voters see a new candidate on television and assess what kind of president he would be from his media character and demographic characteristics, they are extrapolating from observed personal data to unobserved personal data, and from personal data to future presidential policies and performance. When voters judge how a candidate will run the government from how he manages his campaign, or whether he will have an honest administration from perceptions of his personal honesty, they are making large extrapolations with little or no discomfort, or even awareness that they are extrapolating. Thus: "In the absence of better evidence, people readily predict success in graduate school from an IQ test score, research productivity from performance in a colloquium, or the size of a mother's

graduation gift to her daughter from the size of a tip that she gave to a waiter."⁸

When voters make these jumps—assessing character from interviews or from observing the candidate with his family, and then predicting future presidential performance from these personal traits—they are making intuitive predictions by representativeness.⁹ When making political judgments by representativeness, people compare their evidence about a candidate with their mental model of a president. They judge the likelihood of a candidate's being a good president by how well the evidence about him fits the essential features of their model of a good president.¹⁰ Representativeness, then, is a form of clinical goodness-of-fit testing.¹¹

Demographics and résumés are important because of our talent for developing narratives about others. From fragments of information and random observations of behavior, we can develop full-blown causal narratives about kinds of people, and these narratives (or scenarios, or scripts) are so suggestive that we are not aware of the limited data from which we are generating them. Once a narrative about a person has been generated from fragmentary data, moreover, it may take a good deal of information to alter the narrative and change evaluations of the person. Thus, the representativeness research is also psychology's way of testing whether a picture is really worth a thousand words—or of learning just how many words it is worth.

When we generate narratives about people from specific traits, we are acting as clinicians, not as statisticians or scientists. As clinicians, we use different standards to test our ideas. As Bruner has noted, "With science, we ask finally for some verification (or some proof against falsification). In the domain of narrative and explication of human action, we ask instead that, upon reflection, the account correspond to some perspective we can imagine or 'feel' as right."¹²

In the statistical mode, we increase our confidence in a judgment by getting data about more trials or instances; in a clinical mode, we increase our confidence by getting a fuller picture. For example, when asked whether it was more likely that a student chosen at random was "depressed and quit college and attempted suicide" or simply "attempted suicide," a statistician would say that "attempted suicide" was *by definition* more likely, because you cannot be depressed *and* quit college *and* attempt suicide without at least attempting suicide; in other words, a conjunction of events is never more likely than any one of them. People judge likelihood by "fullness of picture" and thus commonly judge the other way; it is easier to think of

someone being depressed, quitting college, and attempting suicide than just attempting suicide. The probability that someone is both an artist and a Republican is lower than the probability that a person is a Republican, but if the person resembles our *image* of a Republican artist more closely than our image of a Republican, we will estimate the probability of the conjunction higher than the probability of the single event.¹³

Character versus Incentives

The tendency to imagine whole people from specific traits and isolated observations of character is strengthened by our willingness to assume that we are learning about character whenever we observe behavior. We explain our own behavior in terms of situational constraints and incentives, but when we judge the behavior of others, we assume that it reveals character. Your behavior tells me what kind of person you are; mine reflects my environment.¹⁴ Obviously, this critical difference increases the amount of information about character we acquire and subsequently use in assembling our views of others.

There is, then, an inferential asymmetry in representativeness: we do not make the same kinds of inferences about ourselves that we make about others. We take our own character for granted, explaining our behavior as a response to the situation we are in and the incentives we encounter. When thinking about others and describing their behavior, if we do not know them well, we cannot take their character for granted, and therefore we read their behavior for evidence about their character. This means that both racism and the use of demographic cues as shortcuts are intimately related to representativeness. One example may suffice. In the 1920s and 1930s, Jewish basketball players dominated the sport. Ed Sullivan, who later became famous as the host of a television variety show, was then a sports columnist for the *New York Daily News*. In a 1933 article entitled "Jews Are Star Players," he explained this Jewish athletic dominance as inherent in the Jewish mentality: "Jewish players seem to take naturally to the game. . . . Perhaps this is because the Jew is a natural gambler. Perhaps it is because he devotes himself more closely to a problem than others will."¹⁵

This inferential asymmetry between how we explain our actions and how we explain the actions of others is particularly sharp when we observe behavior we disagree with or judge negatively. Because we tend to overestimate the reasonableness of our own actions, we also overestimate the probability that others would do what we would do. For this reason, we tend to believe that people who make mistakes or blunders are revealing

their true character.¹⁶ This fact has an important effect on our voting behavior: we see politicians who vote against bills that we favor as showing their character and personal preferences, not as adapting to the unavoidable need to compromise or make trade-offs in order to achieve a result acceptable to a majority.

Background Information versus Personal Information

The original research by Kahneman and Tversky on representativeness suggested that no background information about a person would be integrated into the impression drawn from personal behavior. Subsequent research, however, has shown that historical information—what the psychological researchers call “base rate information”—will be integrated when it is comprehended as causally related to character formation and when it is not pallid, remote, or abstract.¹⁷

Past votes by a political candidate frequently are not easily assimilated into a picture, but there is a whole host of tags that do become integrated, such as environmentalist, union member, fundamentalist, right-to-lifer, militant, feminist, military veteran, draft dodger, Rhodes scholar, Eagle Scout, and astronaut. When candidates who were previously unknown to voters stump through the living rooms, supermarkets, and barbershops of Iowa and New Hampshire, voters use lists of background data. They learn that Jimmy Carter was an ex-governor of Georgia, Gary Hart a senator, and George Bush an ambassador, congressman, and CIA director. They also integrate this information into their images of the candidates. However—and this is the critical point—they will decide what kind of governor Carter was and what kind of president he will be *not* on the basis of knowledge about his performance as governor but on their assessment of how likely it is that Carter, as a person, was a good governor.

Personal versus Political Narratives

If people knew enough about politics, they could generate a picture of a politician in the same way they generate pictures of other people from knowing their demographics and personality traits.

Tell a “political junkie” how a politician has voted, and what kind of district or state he or she is from, and the junkie, after considering the interplay of personal preferences and political necessities, can tell you something about the politician’s character and beliefs. But few people have enough knowledge about the organization of government and the dynam-

ics of legislation to do this; most find it far easier to develop a personal narrative, and then assess political character from personal character. When they infer likely policy positions from a candidate's familiarity with tamales or biscuits or caviar, they are implicitly predicating their inferences on the "myth of tight linkage." Social scientists did this too when they searched for underlying dimensions like "need achievement" or an "authoritarian personality" or "attitudinal consistency." Social scientists have learned that the view of the brain as a large computer spreadsheet, where each piece of new data updates all relevant applications, is wrong; they have learned that people can tolerate much more inconsistency than they had once thought. But when people assess political character from personal character, they are assuming a high degree of consistency in interpersonal organization.

Gresham's Law of Political Information

Because we generate narratives about kinds of people, it is easier to take personal data and fill in the political facts and policies than to start with the political facts and fill in the personal data. This has an important political implication in decision making and evaluation: campaign behavior can dominate political history.

Judgment by representativeness means that people can quickly shift the data base from which they judge candidates. A voter may have information about the past accomplishments of a candidate, but when exposed to the candidate on television, may judge future performance solely by how "presidential" the candidate appears, ignoring evidence about past performance. Furthermore, personal evidence is so compelling that candidates known personally and recently come to appear more attractive than candidates with less recent images.¹⁸

Presidential appearance, particularly in the short run, can seem to voters to be an adequate basis for predicting presidential success in the future. This can occur because in comparing personal information with political behavior, one is comparing stories with facts. Personal data gathered from observing the candidate generates a story about the candidate—what he or she is like and is likely to do if elected. The information about votes, offices held, and policy positions taken in the past does not generate a full story and may not even be joined with the personal data. Narratives are more easily compiled and are retained longer than facts. Narratives, further, require more negative information before they change.¹⁹ When judgments of likelihood are made by representativeness, people do not integrate personal data with background data easily, and often they do not do it at all.

Personal data can dominate or even obliterate background data; "when worthless specific evidence is given, prior probabilities are ignored."²⁰

This is a point where the cognitive literature seems to me more optimistic than warranted about the use of information. Daniel Kahneman has written that "distant labels or incidents will be ignored when evidence that is closer to the target . . . is available."²¹ But his own work shows that this does not always follow. Recent data of one form dominates distant data of the same form, but when some of the data are personal narrative and some are political facts, distant personal data can dominate more recent impersonal material.

In elections, Gresham's law of political information means that personal information can drive more relevant political information out of consideration. Thus there can be a perverse relationship between the amount of information voters are given about a candidate and the amount of information they actually use: a small amount of personal information can dominate a large amount of historical information about a past record. This dominance of personal campaign data over past political data is what I have called Gresham's law of political information. Just as bad money drives good money out of circulation, so does easily absorbed personal information drive more relevant but hard-to-assimilate political information out of consideration.

In one context—campaign information versus past voting records—Gresham's law is both strong and discouraging: personally uninspiring politicians with a career of solid accomplishments get bypassed in primaries for fresh new faces with lots of one-liners but no record of accomplishment. In the context of low-information rationality and information shortcuts, however, Gresham's law is somewhat less bleak; there are many low-information cues which are proxies for political records and which voters may pick up and incorporate into their assessments of future performance.

Gresham's Law and New Candidates

People's ability to judge by representativeness explains why it is possible for new candidates to do so well against established "heavies" in the early primaries. If people could not assemble full and coherent images from personal observations, well-established candidates with records would dominate primaries—except when voters were so unhappy with them that they were willing to gamble on new faces.

From a psychological point of view, voters do not necessarily gamble when they select new candidates over better-known candidates, because the comparisons they make are clinical. In comparing candidates, the process of projection—judging future likelihood by representativeness—does not automatically take account of different levels of information about the candidates. If voters were statisticians, they would integrate personal data with historical data and then adjust their predictions to account for the quantities of information upon which they were based. In statistical terms, they would regress for limited information, so that the extent to which they predicted performances that would deviate from the norm would depend on the quantity of data the prediction was based upon.

If a little data about one candidate suggests that he would be a good president, and a lot of data about another candidate suggests the same thing, statisticians would say that it is more likely that the second candidate will do well; they would discount the prediction based on less data. But voters are not statisticians, and they do not automatically discount, or regress, for limited data. They are, at best, clinicians, and they will be as confident in predictions made from flimsy and remote data as in those made from substantial and recent data.²²

Jimmy Carter provides a clear example of how fast people can come to believe they know “something” about a candidate and feel able to rate him. Carter was an ex-governor of Georgia who had no television exposure at all prior to the 1976 primary. He won the Iowa primary in January, receiving some national publicity, and then received a lot of national publicity after winning in New Hampshire the next month, but few Americans outside Georgia and Florida could have heard of him a month before he won in New Hampshire. Gerald Ford had been president nearly nineteen months by February 1976 and had nearly as much media coverage for each month of his presidency as Carter had for his one month in the public eye. Yet despite the disparity in amounts of exposure and duration of time over which people had a chance to observe the two men, people who knew of Carter were able to place him on issues almost as readily as those who knew of Ford.²³

Walter Mondale’s famous campaign query about Gary Hart, “Where’s the beef?” was an attempt to make voters aware of how little they knew about Hart. President Ford’s campaign against Carter in 1976 was also focused in large measure on pointing out how little voters knew about Carter. The very fact that better-known candidates need to work so hard to remind voters how little they know about some of the new candidates em-

phasizes just how far a little personal data can go for new candidates, particularly when the data are consistent and clear.

Framing and Availability

While the representativeness literature emphasizes that information gets used when it can be incorporated into a coherent picture, the framing literature emphasizes formulation effects: what we incorporate into a picture or narrative depends on the point of view or frame we use. The decision frame has been defined as the "decision-maker's conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice. The frame that the decision-maker adopts is controlled partly by the formulation of the problem and partly by the norms, habits, and personal characteristics of the decision-maker."²⁴ The frame "determines how a task is conceived, what kind of evidence is considered, and the cognitive strategy employed."²⁵

The frame, or point of view, determines how people think about gains or losses. It also matters because different reference points, or points of view, bring forth different information and attitudes.²⁶ As Aristotle noted, it adds to an orator's influence if "his hearers should be in just the right frame of mind."²⁷

The seminal cognitive studies on choice and decision making are the experiments by Kahneman and Tversky, which demonstrate how the formulation of choices affects decision making.²⁸ Their experiments, and many subsequent studies as well, show that when people perceive themselves to be ahead, or in a good position, they are relatively cautious, preferring a bird in the hand to two in the bush; and that when they are behind, they are more likely to gamble, risking a bird in the hand to gain two from the bush. In psychological terms, they are generally risk-averse on gains and risk-seeking on losses. More important, however, these studies demonstrate that the way in which statistically identical alternatives are formulated can have a significant impact on the choices people make. A simple but classic example is the different ways that people perceive cash discounts and credit surcharges. Whether a store posts the credit-card price on its goods and gives a cash discount, or posts the cash price on its goods and charges a credit-card surcharge, is of no *cost* consequence to either cash customers or credit customers. However, people have a marked preference for cash discounts on posted credit-card prices over credit surcharges on posted cash prices, despite their exactly equivalent cost. Also, whether a choice is formulated in terms of the "good results" or the "bad results"—

whether, for example, people are offered a choice between medical policies in terms of lives saved or in terms of lives lost—affects the policy they choose.

The way a problem is formulated can even lead to a reversal of preferences. When it comes to choosing a lottery in which to buy a ticket, people prefer a lottery with high odds for a small prize over a lottery with low odds for a big prize. However, if they are given a chance to sell the tickets before the drawing, they place a higher value on the ticket with low odds for a big prize. This clear reversal of preferences is not a result of faulty mental arithmetic or inexperience with thinking about odds; the experiments have been replicated in Las Vegas!²⁹

Framing is to psychology as role theory is to sociology. Role theory tells us that we can present many different personas to others. At different times of the day, we can be a spouse, a parent, a child, a worker, a partisan, a customer, or a patient. By showing us this, role theory also says that we do not use all of ourselves at any one time. Framing tells us that since we cannot look at a person or situation from all perspectives at the same time, we cannot use all of ourselves when we view others. Both framing and role theory, then, are theories about the ways we divide ourselves and about which parts of ourselves we use in presenting ourselves or in viewing the presentations of others.

When Framing Matters

Framing effects occur whenever altering the formulation of a problem, or shifting the point of view of an observer, changes the information and ideas the observer will use when making decisions. Framing effects, in other words, occur only when there is differentiation in the ways that we can think about a subject. If the same information and metaphors always come to the fore no matter how questions about a subject are formulated, there is no differentiation and hence no possibility of framing effects. There is also no framing if there is a single dominant attitude about a subject. If people integrated all their attitudes about candidates and parties into a single measure, there would be no framing effects; the single measure would have the same explanatory power in all situations. Or if people had different attitudes about a candidate or a party but had one attitude that dominated all others, again, framing wouldn't matter.

Framing effects are not an artifact of casual, "top of the head" responses to low-salience subjects. People who care about a subject, who think about their responses, and who are certain of their beliefs are just as susceptible to

framing effects.³⁰ Whenever there is more than one way to think about a subject there can be framing effects.

There are limits to framing. Certainly there is some information that is always brought to the fore regardless of perspective. People who wear rose-colored glasses see the same objects that we see; no matter what the perspective from which a subject is viewed, their view will be rosier than the view of people without rose-colored glasses. Similarly, some subjects, no matter how they are viewed, and no matter how choices or problems are formulated, evoke the same dominant attitudes and ideas. In general, you can frame all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot frame all of the people all of the time.³¹

It is, of course, always an empirical issue whether framing matters: that is, whether there is so little information that differentiation is impossible, or whether there are such strong dominant evocations or such specific lenses that perspectives don't matter.

A particularly valuable example of framing comes from Shanto Iyengar's work on the types of causal reasoning people use in narratives. The difference between how people think about a person when they are told he or she is poor, and how they think about the same person when they are told he or she is unemployed, is a clear example of framing effects. Iyengar has examined the types of causal reasoning people do when they think about poverty and unemployment. He coded the stories into two general types: stories which focus on *dispositional* explanations for the subject's predicament, such as motivation, cultural background, or skill; and stories which focus on *systemic* explanations for the subject's predicament, such as government policy or economic conditions.³² Poverty evokes more dispositional and less systemic narratives than does unemployment. In other words, poverty is thought to be caused by individual actions, while unemployment is seen as due to systemic causes.

Furthermore, Iyengar has shown that differences in the type of causality have political consequences. People who attribute the causes of a problem to systemic forces are more likely to link the problem to their political judgments than people who attribute the story to dispositional causes.³³ Just as people are more likely to see the causes of inflation in political terms than the causes of unemployment, unemployment is seen as more systemic than poverty.

Framing the President

The evidence is strong that framing matters in presidential politics, and it matters in ways that follow directly from our discussions up to this point. When the Columbia studies found that the 1948 campaign changed the relative salience of domestic and international issues and that this change affected votes, they were finding, in psychological parlance, framing effects. People formulated their voting choices in terms of what they thought a president would be doing or what they wanted him to be doing. When voters in 1948 thought more about a president dealing with domestic affairs and less about how he would deal with international affairs, this change of viewpoints on the presidency affected evaluations of the parties and candidates.

The Columbia studies suggested, and Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder have experimentally confirmed, three points: there is enough differentiation in people's images of presidents for formulation effects to matter; changing people's ideas about problems facing the president changes the way people think about presidents; and changing the ways people think about presidents affects their assessments of presidents as well as their votes.³⁴

Iyengar and Kinder do not discuss framing explicitly in their book *News That Matters*. They focus on how television news affects the public political agenda, and how the political agenda affects the way presidents are evaluated. Nevertheless, their experiments and their parallel statistical analyses of public opinion polls and network news offer strong evidence of formulation effects—i.e., framing—in politics.

Iyengar and Kinder devised a complex series of experiments for testing the extent of agenda setting, and these experiments controlled for, or took account of, prior knowledge and awareness by viewers.³⁵ They recruited groups of residents of New Haven and Ann Arbor to watch television newscasts and to answer questions before and after their viewing. Some of the network newscasts that the viewers watched, however, had been subtly altered; stories from previous news shows about energy, inflation, unemployment, or arms control were put into some of the programs but not others, so that some viewers saw no stories about these subjects.

Iyengar and Kinder also did time-series analyses of public opinion polls and network news coverage. They analyzed relations between the changes from month to month in four series of data: the proportion of respondents in national polls who named a particular problem, such as energy, as the most important problem facing the nation; the number of network news

stories about the subject; the actual price of gasoline, or the actual rate of inflation or unemployment; and the number of presidential speeches about the subject.

Both the experiments and their time-series analyses demonstrated that both television news programs and presidential speeches change voters' agendas. During the energy crisis of 1974–80, voters' concerns with energy reflected not just shortages and prices, but also stories on the evening network news and presidential speeches.³⁶ Even when there is extensive information about a problem, such as energy during the late 1970s, news and speeches focus more attention on the problem as a problem of national policy.

Not surprisingly, when the news media change the agenda, they change the president's performance rating for the policy area being featured in the news stories. When a story is highlighted on the television news, the president's ratings for the area of the story are affected. Energy stories change the president's energy ratings, defense stories change the president's defense ratings, and economic stories change the president's economic ratings.

Changing the news focus also changes the relation between a specific problem rating and the overall rating of the president. A voter's overall rating of the president ("Overall, would you say the president is doing an excellent, good, fair, or only poor job?") can be seen as a weighted combination of the ratings that he or she gives the president on specific problems. When television news includes stories about defense or energy or the economy, for example, the relative importance or weight of the specific rating of the president in that area to the president's overall rating can double.³⁷ That is, energy stories can make a voter's rating of the president on energy twice as important in his or her overall assessment of the president.

This research is significant not only because it confirms the extent of the gatekeeping function of television news, but also because it shows how different varieties of stories on the same subject can have different effects on presidential ratings and votes. For problems that voters assume are intimately connected to the presidency, like foreign policy and defense, news stories affected the president's ratings for those areas whether or not the president was mentioned in the story. For problems that less-informed voters did not automatically associate with the president, the ratings did not change unless the story mentioned the president. For example, many people did not automatically assume that presidents were responsible for

energy policy; for such people the effect of stories on presidential ratings depended on whether the story provided the link.

Television news stories frame the president, affecting people's conception of the acts and outcomes associated with him. Even in the middle of an energy crisis, or a bout of high inflation or unemployment, when people see news stories about these problems, their overall assessments of the president, and their assessments of how he is dealing with the specific problem, are both affected. Voters who have seen stories about energy place more weight on energy relative to other issues when they rate the president's overall performance.

Television, in other words, can bring problems from the mental back burner to the front burner of presidential images, making voters more aware of particular subjects when they think about the president and evaluate him. This goes well beyond the by-product and daily-life information theories from the last chapter. Some of the effect, some of the time, can occur because people who are concerned about certain problems in their own lives did not know that other people were also concerned about them, or that they were presidential problems. That is, news stories can tell you that crack cocaine is everywhere and that many people are worried, not just you and your friends. However, some of the effect is formulation effect; the news story makes the problem more prominent among all problems when you create your mental image of the president.

As there are limits on framing, so are there limits on availability. Availability tells us that data we have dealt with recently are more likely to be used than older data; this raises the troublesome possibility that a barrage of exposure to a minor issue will push important issues out of consideration. However, importance restrains the effects of availability because important attitudes are more accessible than unimportant attitudes.³⁸ Therefore, if a voter is exposed to a number of messages about a secondary issue, older, more important attitudes will still be available alongside the newly obtained information.

It is often difficult to sort out framing effects from availability effects. Either way, what you can picture and incorporate into scenarios is what you can use, and the same political effects hold. I believe, however, that the examples discussed above fit far more easily into the category of framing effects than into that of "mere" availability effects.

Framing and availability also have implications for causal thinking and assessment in politics. Iyengar's work on dispositional and systemic causality, discussed above, demonstrates that the type of causal reasoning voters do about a problem is also affected by the causal reasoning of the

story. The problems we think about and the way we explain the problems we think about are affected by television. Similarly, sins of commission will hurt more than sins of omission, because it is easier for people to generate scenarios based on what they have seen than scenarios based on what they have not seen.³⁹ This is one more way in which incumbents and challengers differ; incumbents will have more sins of commission.

Frames That Matter

If the differences in how voters rate presidents on different issues were minimal, the change in focus prompted by television stories or presidential speeches would be insignificant. However, the variations between problem areas in presidential ratings are large enough to determine the outcome of an election. When the issue that voters focus on is changed, ratings of presidents and challengers vary enough to change the vote.

There are five changes of frame that occur repeatedly in presidential politics, and each can have substantial effects on the vote. Each one affects the way voters formulate their evaluations and their choices by changing their information and point of view.

First, an incumbent running for another term can be thought of as a candidate or as a president; the Rose Garden strategy assumes that a president who chooses not to stray beyond the White House Rose Garden will be seen as rightfully confident of victory, unlike the campaigner, who must crisscross the nation in an effort to win votes. I discuss this at length below.

Second, a candidate can be thought about in terms of the kind of person he is or in terms of the kind of record he has; this was discussed at length in the earlier section on representativeness.

Third, a candidate can be thought of either as a candidate battling to win a nomination or as the chosen representative and nominee of a party; as noted in the discussion of the two-step media flow in chapter 3, political conventions have a major effect on the way candidates are viewed. This effect is particularly strong for vice presidents, like Ford in 1976 and Bush in 1988; the party convention transformed them from candidates to nominees and from subordinates to commanders.⁴⁰

The fourth change of frame which is important in presidential elections is the change from domestic to international issues. Since 1948 we have known that voters think about domestic and international presidential issues differently enough to matter. As I noted in chapter 3, there are differences between an incumbent who is known from performance in office and a challenger who is known only from a campaign. International issues are accessible when people think about the president because they

assume he is responsible in some manner for foreign affairs. There is no equivalent activity for challengers, with the rare exception of a victorious general like Dwight Eisenhower.⁴¹ The importance of hostages to Jimmy Carter is but one such example of the importance of foreign affairs, but John Aldrich, John Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida have shown that foreign and defense attitudes have played some role in every election since at least 1952.⁴² The asymmetry, however, does not always benefit the president, as the hostage example discussed in the prologue emphasizes. Candidates can say, as did Ronald Reagan during the 1980 campaign, that they hope the president has a secret plan, because it would be terrible "if the president isn't doing more than he has told us he is doing."

The fifth is that voters think about inflation, unemployment, and poverty very differently, and which economic problem is uppermost in their minds has important consequences for how they think about and evaluate presidents. The extent to which they link economics to the presidency varies between the three issues first of all, as I have shown above and in chapter 2. Further, as noted in chapter 3, there are substantial differences in how the parties are viewed on the issues; the three economic problems vary in how political they are and how much of a bonus or onus they give the parties as well. When people think about inflation there is more of an edge for Republicans than when people think about unemployment or poverty, where Democrats have an edge in party heats.

Framing and the Rose Garden Strategy

Rose Garden strategies are a prime example of campaigning predicated on framing effects. Incumbents try to increase their psychological and political distance from their challengers by planting their incumbency firmly in voters' minds. Incumbents want to be invested with authority, to be seen as more solid, certain, and credible. As Downs had intuited, incumbency is a cognitive reference point.⁴³ Politicians believe that incumbency per se is generally a good thing, and they are right.

It is easier to picture someone in a position who has already been there, and when we think about an office or about a real officeholder and a challenger, we will generally be able to develop a fuller picture of the incumbent. Theoretically, then, there should also be enough differentiation for framing to affect ratings and choices at critical junctures of a political campaign. If Rose Gardens favor incumbents, then there might also be changes in the ratings of political figures when they first are framed in a campaign context. If the assumption behind the Rose Garden strategy—that an incumbent is seen as stronger than a campaigner—is correct, there should be

a drop in support for unpopular presidents when they are seen in campaign contexts. There is extensive polling data from 1980 that demonstrates a move away from President Carter in his primary battle with Senator Edward Kennedy.

Primaries are two-stage elections. In the first stage, for weeks or even months, voters hear about the campaign on national news, where the reports of distant battles and the reports of national government are commingled. In the second, the last few weeks before their state primary, they are also exposed to campaign commercials, rallies, and campaign contacts. We might call these the Rose Garden phase and the bread-and-circuses phase. President Carter did not campaign in 1980 until the end of the primary season, until the last primaries in California, Ohio, and New Jersey, so that his presidential image would dominate over his campaign image. Senator Kennedy campaigned extensively. In every single primary, voters who decided their vote in the last week, when the campaign in their states was in full bloom, gave Kennedy a larger share of their votes than did voters who made up their minds earlier.

Further, there is even stronger evidence from New Hampshire that placing voters in a campaign frame was detrimental to President Carter. Campaigns concentrate their door-to-door visits and their phone calls on their most likely supporters. Thus, it is about as universal a finding as one can get in politics that voters contacted by a campaign are more likely to support that candidate than voters who have not been contacted. Despite this, in the 1980 New Hampshire primary, a CBS News/*New York Times* survey showed that people contacted by Carter's campaign had more negative evaluations of him than Democrats who had not been contacted by his campaign. Among registered Democrats who were contacted by Carter's campaign, 53 percent had favorable opinions, 38 percent had unfavorable opinions, and 9 percent were undecided. Among registered Democrats who had not been contacted by his campaign, 65 percent rated him favorably, 25 percent rated him negatively, and 10 percent were uncertain.⁴⁴

Placing a president either in the Rose Garden or on the campaign trail, then, can change the way he is viewed, although it is not likely that popular presidents would be hurt as much as Carter was by the change of frame.

Television, Candidates, and Campaigns

Our discussion of the narrative mode and the ways in which people assemble pictures of politicians leads naturally to a focus on television, for the growth of TV news broadcasting, at the expense of newspaper coverage, is a prime explanation for the historic shift toward a candidate-

centered politics. There is now ample theoretical reason to support beliefs that the differences between television and newspapers are important.

Richard Rubin compared television news with the front pages of major newspapers; television news was both more national and more political, and also focused more narrowly on individual politicians rather than institutions. Not only was there more politics on television newscasts than on the front page, more of it was about national, as opposed to state or local, politics. Rubin also found that the national political stories on television were more often centered on the president rather than Congress. This was true even of stories about economic matters, 80 percent of which were presented with explicit links to the presidency.⁴⁵ Since Rubin has shown that television news covers the president more intensively, and that it more often links national political problems such as those relating to the economy directly to the president, it can be expected that voters will link more problems to the president. Further, the increased linkage of politics to the federal level, and of federal politics to the presidency, generally ignores institutions and emphasizes the personal calculations of the president. Television coverage puts more emphasis on the president as a politician who must think of election at all times; as Paul Weaver has noted, considerations of policy are only a backdrop against which personal ambitions are played out.⁴⁶ Television news, basically, is national news linked to the president as an individual.

The Rubin research, coupled with Iyengar and Kinder's work on the effects of television, lead to a different conclusion about the role of television than the original expectations at the beginning of the television age. In 1952, when there were enough television sets and news shows to begin to study the effects of television on presidential politics, a major research concern was how television would change the kinds of personality attributes that voters looked for and found in candidates. In that year Stevenson and Eisenhower both were perceived somewhat differently on television than in newspapers or on radio, but the differences were small and the effects were limited to those two candidates. That is, there was no general tendency for television to enhance particular features for all candidates, or for people who watched television instead of listening to radio broadcasts to be aware of different personality characteristics for all candidates.⁴⁷

This early research, however, missed the major effect of television. Television's major impact came not from emphasizing certain personality traits and deemphasizing others, but from a general focusing on the individual politician at the expense of parties and institutions. Talks between leaders of the United States and Russia became global prize fights, and TV debates

became like the World Series, as Samuel Lubell found in 1960.⁴⁸ As Paul Weaver argued in 1972, television news systematically portrays politics as conflicts between individuals, not between institutions or principles.⁴⁹ Television, in Scott Keeter's felicitous phrase, provides the "illusion of intimacy."⁵⁰

Furthermore, the increased educational level of the country heightens the potential effects of framing and hence the effects of television news and campaigning. Educated people are more able to develop complex narratives, and as complexity increases, judgments about people become less extreme and hence more ambiguous and open to framing effects.⁵¹

Calculation Shortcuts

In addition to the research on how people assemble information about people, the cognitive literature has also considered how people use calculation aids as they search among candidates in their decision making. Making complex calculations in order to "maximize expected value" is difficult for all of us, and we are frequently unsure of our choices or projections. We are more confident in some of our choices than in others. An examination of the situations in which people are most confident in their calculations shows that when we are able to use calculation shortcuts, we are more confident and more comfortable in our estimations and choices.

One problem in making choices is resolving contradictions and inconsistencies. When all the evidence points the same way because all the data are consistent, we do not have to resolve contradictions or decide how to weigh the evidence for one conclusion against the evidence for another. Internal consistency raises confidence also. People's confidence in predictions increases when all the evidence points in the same direction.⁵² At the beginning of a primary campaign, the data offered to voters are often all positive or all negative; therefore people are often most confident in the predictions most likely to be inaccurate and subject to later revision.

Another problem is assessing probabilities. People are confused, even repelled, by vague probabilities.⁵³ When people find themselves in situations where they must implicitly compare the likelihood of different outcomes, they become less confident. When they are dealing with easy calculations of likelihood, however, they are more confident in their choices. When they can think of "always" or "never," the probabilities of one or zero, they overrate the accuracy of their predictions.⁵⁴ People also find it difficult to calculate when choices require separate assessments of gains and losses. Lotteries with only gains are more attractive than bets with gains and

losses, even if the mixed bet has a higher expected return.⁵⁵ Finally, people are more confident in making predictions from the more reliable to the less reliable measure, even though actual accuracy is the same in either direction.⁵⁶

Some types of data and probabilities make it easier for people to calculate and choose. People overvalue consistent information and find it easier to use than inconsistent information; they find information that is all good or all bad more valuable than mixed information; and they prefer positive bets to mixed bets. When people use these shortcuts, they are more confident in their decisions. The most confident projections are made when there are what can be termed *pseudocertainty effects*, the types of data and probabilities which give people strong assurance in their predictions by offering them easy and clear calculations.

When people can use "always" or "never," for example, they are making predictions near the tail of the distribution; when they are more confident in a little consistent data than in a large amount of inconsistent data they are not correcting for the amount of data but for the ease of assessing the data. Because of pseudocertainty effects, overvaluing "the always and the never," finding information that is all good or all bad more valuable than mixed information, and preferring positive to mixed bets, people are most confident about their least accurate projections.⁵⁷

The Drunkard's Search

The calculation shortcuts which people use in making choices of all kinds, and the pseudocertainty principles underlying their calculations, demonstrate that people have difficulty making choices when they must integrate data about several factors.⁵⁸ When there are several factors, or when some indicators point to one choice and other indicators to a different choice, people are, in effect, being pushed to weigh the pluses and minuses, to assign weights to the different features they care about. People have a general aversion to making trade-offs and instead search for a way to make their choices one-dimensional. As Robyn Dawes has noted, "People are good at picking out the right predictor variables and coding them . . . People are bad at integrating information from diverse and incomparable sources."⁵⁹

People particularly need search aids in situations like primaries when they possess different kinds and quantities of information about each candidate. The way they make use of shortcuts in searching among complex choices results in a Drunkard's Search, a search among obvious differences.

Technically, of course, the Drunkard's Search, as the very name implies, is a shortcut to easier information *acquisition*. Here I am referring to a deci-

sion about how to compare candidates, about the criterion on which to compare candidates and make a choice, because a decision about where to look, or a decision about which information to retrieve, becomes a decision about how to decide. People are particularly likely to use one-dimensional searches, focusing on a single issue or attribute, when there is no dominant alternative. Such a procedure "avoids mental strain and provides a compelling argument."⁶⁰

When complicated choices involving many different issues are simplified to a single dimension, which dimension is chosen is important. Designation of an attribute as focal tends to increase the mutability of that attribute, and increased mutability increases the weight of an attribute. Since increased awareness of alternatives tends to increase the perceived importance of a feature, the search process, by focusing on a particular feature among many, gives disproportionate weight to the focal, comparative feature, even if this feature originally was of lesser importance.⁶¹

Front-runners can be a reference point for voters and for other candidates. At the beginning of a primary season, voters will not know anything about many of the candidates, and will consider information about only a few from the whole field. If there is a front-runner, the voter is likely to consider that candidate when evaluating other candidates, both because the front-runner is likely to be known and because the front-runner is likely to be considered viable.

A Drunkard's Search among candidates is dependent upon the characteristics of the front-runner and can lead to peculiar dynamics. Do front-runners affect the agenda in primaries? Candidates and their strategists believe that they do.⁶² Research about decision making, in fact, does support the idea that it matters whether there is a front-runner, and that it matters who the front-runner is. The way in which front-runners set the stage does affect the dynamics and affects the relative fortunes of the other candidates. Whether it is always bad to be the front-runner, however, is a more complicated question without a simple answer.⁶³

When there is a front-runner, the other candidates frequently describe themselves with reference to how they differ from this candidate; the features of the front-runner which other candidates discuss become focal points of candidate comparison. The increased attention placed on the focal features leads to increased awareness of alternatives, which in turn increases the importance voters place on the focal features in their evaluation of candidates. This places relatively less importance on the features of the front-runner which are ignored, which are taken for granted. For example, as I discuss in chapter 9, in 1984 as the other candidates made

numerous references to Walter Mondale's endorsement by the AFL-CIO, the salience of attitudes toward union political endorsements increased.

When the front-runner is well enough known so that voters know his warts and blemishes, these faults can be magnified in the primaries. Just as people are more comfortable assessing blame for sins of commission than for sins of omission, and more confident making predictions from the more reliable to the less reliable measure, they will be more comfortable with searches made comparing the better-known with the lesser-known candidates, or the incumbent with the challenger. Therefore, it can be a disadvantage to be the front-runner. If voters had the same types of information about each candidate, these voters could compare the candidates on the feature they considered most important, or even on many criteria, not just those advantageous to the challengers.

The relationship between awareness of alternatives and the importance of a trait means that changing the front-runner can change the choice. New search orders over the array of candidates, or comparisons with a different candidate, will be made on different criteria and will affect the weight of all criteria.

Candidates will also try to create obvious differences between themselves and the other candidates to give voters easy ways to separate themselves from the other candidates. A classic example of this was the Republican primary campaign of Congressman John Anderson in 1980, who campaigned on a "new politics" theme. Asked why, if his campaign represented a new politics, he hadn't come up with any new ideas during nineteen years in Congress, Anderson replied, "Well, I have to make an abject confession at this point. I hadn't really sat down and wrestled with myself to the point where I felt it was imperative to come up with new approaches, new ideas. I guess it was the stimulus of a presidential campaign, particularly when you're trying to separate yourself from a field of . . . candidates."⁶⁴

The cognitive literature shows ways that voters process and absorb information and infer meaning. This gives back to voters some of the reasoning they lose when scrutinized with a textbook civics approach to knowledge. Taken together, the Drunkard's Search, Gresham's law of information, and pseudocertainty effects provide a theoretical explanation consistent with the patterns of the rises and falls of new candidates in presidential primaries, a topic explored at length in chapter 6. When we understand these quirks, we can predict how and when the overconfident projections of voters will collapse.

At the same time, the cognitive literature, by showing us ways that personal information and campaign behavior can dominate past political history, also raises new questions about the content of political decisions. A full assessment of the implications of the cognitive contribution, however, depends upon just how well voters are able to make connections between the cues about candidates they absorb and the future political programs of these same candidates. In the next chapter I examine the ways that campaigns matter to voters from the perspective of low-information rationality. I then turn to an examination of primaries and the new candidates that emerge to show just how much political content there is to the support for these candidates.