

F I V E

Attributable Benefits and Political Symbols

WOODY ALLEN ONCE WROTE that the Russian revolution, after simmering for years, erupted “when the serfs finally realized that the Czar and the Tsar were the same person.”¹ This wry joke actually illustrates a truth we shall explore in this chapter: a new understanding of the links between hitherto unconnected people and events can have large political consequences. In any political system with multiple principals and agents, the members, be they serfs or voters, have incomplete information about the relation between the world they see and the actions of officials. Thus, information that changes their beliefs about the connections between officials and outcomes can affect their political preferences. This insight can lead us to an expanded appreciation of campaigns that differs substantially from the original Columbia analysis.

A campaign, from the voters’ perspective, is a search for connections. Voters will equate some present actions with future results and some present results with past actions. They will not always make these equations in an objectively correct manner, but they will always have a rationale for which actions they equate with which results and vice versa. Therefore, candidates’ campaign strategies are designed to offer voters the appropriate rationales for connecting candidates to policies, offices, and voters. When voters learn to connect benefits to specific offices and policies, the benefits become attributable benefits, which thus depend upon both the knowledge and the beliefs of the voters. Candidates strive to provide the links between their actions and the voters by finding symbols that can make these connections efficiently.

Attributable Benefits

If voters had a full understanding of the organization of government, and no uncertainty about what policy choices candidates would make, and no uncertainty about the result of government policies, they would be able to

weigh all issues and assess the impact of each on future benefits. As we have seen, however, these conditions are never present. Voters consider only the few issues they can connect with particular offices and with results they care about.

Voters vote on actions that they equate with results, and on results that they equate with actions. An example of an action equated with results would be a vote to restore or eliminate the death penalty; its consequences are so clear and direct in the minds of voters that they feel little need to see actual results. An example of a result equated with actions would be inflation; it is easily noticed and readily assumed to be the consequence of actions by politicians, even though the voter doesn't know which actions. A result equated with actions is an information shortcut because when the voter sees the result, he or she "knows" that it follows from past actions and does not have to make any further evaluations.

This focus raises two questions that are central to our inquiry at this point: (1) When will voters consider a candidate's performance in terms of benefits received ("What have you done for me lately?"), as opposed to considering his personal image and character ("How have you looked to me lately?")? And (2) when will voters evaluate performance by considering the means politicians use for accomplishing goals, as opposed to reasoning backwards from results?

I have suggested that the single question that best captures the voter's frame of mind when thinking about a candidate in the voting booth is, "What have you done for me lately?" Richard Fenno, studying the ways congressmen developed "home styles"—ways of presenting themselves to constituents—found that the question voters generally asked themselves when thinking about their congressman was "How has he looked to me lately?"² Fenno's finding may seem to imply a different concern, but the difference disappears with a moment's reflection. Voters are always concerned with performance (not just "looks" in the cosmetic sense), but when they are short of both information and understanding of government, as they often are, they may ask instead, as a second-best question, How has he looked to me lately? It is harder to unravel the work of a legislature and determine an individual representative's contribution than to understand the actions of an executive, and since congressmen get less media coverage than presidents, voters usually have less information and understanding about congressmen. Thus on many occasions a voter falls back on a general assessment of a congressman's cultural style and personal character as a second-best alternative to figuring out what the congressman has actually done for him lately. In other words, congress-

men generally act as if constituents judge the likelihood that they are good congressmen by using the representatives heuristic, as described in chapter 4.

Generally, voters judge presidents for what they have done and congressmen for how they have looked, but the two positions are sometimes reversed. When a president is dealing with a complex problem like arms control or preventing nuclear war, voters who are unable to judge easily what the president has done will resort to assessments of general style, of how the president has looked. On the other hand, when an issue like gun control or offshore drilling appears clear to them and leads to a specific vote, they will judge congressmen by what they have done lately and not by how they have looked.

What portion of their benefits voters attribute to any candidate or office depends first upon the structure of the political system and the ease with which benefits and individual actions are connected. In the American system of government, which is both federal and presidential, the benefits that can be connected to the actions of an incumbent or challenger will depend on the office, the voter's information, and the voter's beliefs about government. The difficulty of sorting out individual contributions means that candidates and incumbents seek to associate themselves with the largest possible attributable benefits; this means finding policies and programs which the voter associates with the office. If the voters search under streetlights, then that is where candidates will campaign.

A simple program of small local benefits may win more votes for a congressman than a complex budget compromise that revives the national economy, because 435 congressmen can claim partial credit for approving it. For the same reason, presidents try to emphasize their contributions in areas where voters readily see the president in control, namely foreign policy.

Any candidate who assumes that total benefits and attributable benefits are the same is vulnerable to a candidate who knows how and why the two are different. The knowledge voters have of the links between issues and offices, as discussed in chapter 4, is malleable—even for as prominent and visible an office as the presidency of the United States. It is not just news stories explicitly linking certain problems to presidents that change how voters connect issues with offices. The incumbent president's performance also affects views of the scope of the presidency, and thus affects voters' consideration of issues when they vote for a particular office. In the wake of the Watergate investigations and President Nixon's resignation, Jimmy Carter emphasized the need to reduce secrecy in government and to re-

organize the bureaucracy. Only a minority of voters rated secrecy and reorganization as the most important problems facing the country, but many more voters thought these issues were among those the president could do most about.³

Benefits become attributable only when the voter credits, or attributes, them to a particular politician. Different voters connect different aspects of the economy with the president, for example. Some may assume that the president has enough authority over the economy to control inflation and unemployment; they will judge him directly by the performance of the economy (an example of a result equated with actions). Other voters, with a more complex causal understanding of the economy, may allocate responsibility for inflation and unemployment among the president, Congress, and foreign governments; they may rate the president according to how well he responds to OPEC or Japan. Of course, in judging his response, they may use information shortcuts that are no more sophisticated than those used by other voters to judge the president directly from the rate of unemployment or inflation.

As these examples of economic evaluations indicate, the connections voters make between offices and issues presume political reasoning.⁴ Most Americans believe, for example, that the best way to cut inflation is by cutting government spending. In April 1980, when inflation was in double digits and interest rates were near 20 percent, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll asked whether the best way to cut inflation was by wage and price controls, tax cuts, or spending cuts. Half of the respondents said the best way to cut inflation was by cutting government spending, while only 29 percent said wage and price controls, and 13 percent said tax cuts.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that when inflation rises, there is far less support for government spending on social programs. At the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson ordered bombing campaigns that he did not believe would be effective because so many Americans believed otherwise; he sensed that he would not be able to get support for sending in troops until bombing had failed.⁶

Voters generally care about ends, not means; they judge government by results and are generally ignorant of or indifferent about the methods by which the results are achieved.⁷ They are likely to know if there is a sharp rise in interest rates or energy prices, but not what specific actions caused the increases. However, this general rule has important exceptions. When voters have clear beliefs about the effects of specific government actions or laws, they will care about means, because they will equate specific results with government actions. The search by politicians for attributable benefits

leads them to select means that voters associate directly with ends. Thus, while voters may care far more about the economy or the end of communism than they do about death penalties, sex education, abortion, or gun control, candidates devote a disproportionate amount of time to these areas that seem to promise quick, direct results to voters. In addition, ends are sometimes diffuse and hard to evaluate, but means are clearly visible. It is hard, for example, to assess whether the death penalty and gun-control laws actually deter crime, but if voters take it as an article of faith that they do, then politicians will support the death penalty and gun-control laws to associate themselves with attributable benefits. Many voters take it as an article of faith that an Equal Rights Amendment has clear and direct effects, and many voters believe that sex education and school prayer have similarly obvious and clear results.

When voters equate actions with results, they need no evidence to confirm their belief. In direct contrast, when they equate results with actions, they know specific results and assume that a particular official is responsible for them, even if they do not know exactly how, or under what policies. Many voters assume that a president is partly responsible for inflation and unemployment, although they may know nothing about prime rates, deficits, and trade flows. Hostages are a clear international example of a result that voters equate with actions. President Carter was held responsible for not getting the hostages back, although many voters had no ideas at all about how they could be released or why they had been taken.

When voters know and understand specific actions by a politician they are less concerned about looks and will focus on deeds. In contrast, when voters estimate the performance of a politician by inferring backward from results, because they are uncertain about the specific connections between a politician and the results they are observing, looks will be more important than deeds. They will be judging by likelihood, or representativeness. If George McGovern had established a long record of support for Israel, asking for a glass of milk with his kosher hot dog wouldn't have worried anyone. If Gerald Ford had been intimately involved with the American Hispanic community, the unshucked tamale would not have hurt him.

Effective Campaign Issues

Issues can be effective in a campaign only if the voters see three connections: (1) between the issue and the office; (2) between the issue and the candidate; and (3) between the issue and the benefits they care about. On some issues, voters have information, and on others the candidate must provide it. And on some issues the connections between the political office

and candidate, on one hand, and the voters' benefits, on the other, are clear, whereas on other issues the connections must be spelled out by the candidates.

It is easier to campaign on an issue that involves information obtained as a part of daily life than on one involving information that must be supplied to the voters. Data about inflation and interest rates are more widely known by voters than data about Social Security solvency, deficits, and exchange rates. It is also easier to campaign on an issue that is clearly connected both to the president and to the voter's concerns, like hostages, than on an issue which is not directly connected, like the budget deficit. For most voters and in most elections, budget deficits are not obviously related to inflation and unemployment or to other immediate concerns, even though for a decade fiscal conservatives have been using analogies between national deficits and family deficits. Nor has the balance of payments been clearly linked in the minds of most voters with their standard of living or the country's well-being.

In some cases, though, voters perceive clear connections if they are provided the data. A \$600 ashtray and \$700 coffeepot purchased by the Pentagon will receive more attention from politicians and the media during campaigns than weapons systems costing billions of dollars. Voters, and politicians, find it easier to judge the value of ashtrays and coffeepots than to decide whether a multi-billion-dollar electronics project, like a cruise missile or a weather satellite, is fairly priced, well managed, or necessary.

In some cases the data about a potential issue are obtained in daily life and the connections to the concerns of the voter are clear, but the political links are not established. The quality and cost of residential phone service, the price of electricity, and the price of a pound of sugar are related directly to federal policies on antitrust and communications, on one hand, and to tariffs and import quotas, on the other. Yet how many voters know how phone service and sugar prices relate to politics?

The hardest issues to use in a campaign are those in which both the connections and the data are unclear to many voters. These issues may have great potential when understood, but sometimes the connections are difficult to make. It is hard to connect budget deficits, for example, to the president and to the state of the economy, because many people do not understand how presidents can cause or alter deficits, and many never see links between national deficits and their own standard of living. On such issues, also, the symbols may be so unclear as to suggest the opposite of what they are intended to mean. A strong dollar sounds good, not bad, and the links between strong dollars, exports, jobs, and deficits are not easily

clarified in a short period of time. President Nixon expressed his understanding of this problem during a campaign discussion with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman. When Haldeman said that Arthur F. Burns, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, was concerned about speculation in the Italian lira, Nixon replied, "Well I don't give a [expletive deleted] against the lira. . . . There ain't a vote in it. Only George Schultz and people like that think it's great [unintelligible]. There's no votes in it, Bob."⁸

Contemplating the three conditions necessary for an issue to be salient in a campaign can tell us a great deal. When there is either no information or no linkage, supplying the missing element can stimulate a rapid change in preferences and attitudes. This is particularly true in primaries. Thus whether voters are assessing political competence by campaign behavior or estimating political character from personal character, new information from campaign flubs or personal revelations can have striking effects. New linkages are the other source of rapid changes. In 1989, when the Supreme Court decided in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* that states could enact stringent regulations on abortion, abortion suddenly became more firmly linked to state and local elections. In that year Democrats scored major victories in New Jersey and Virginia, and, in both states, far more people said abortion was a critical issue in their vote for governor than had been the case in previous gubernatorial elections. And, after the Supreme Court decision, when President Bush announced that he would veto a bill funding abortions for rape and incest victims, attitudes about abortion became more closely linked to evaluations of the president, exactly as in the Iyengar and Kinder experiments discussed in chapter 4.

Why Campaigns Create Symbols

Candidates seeking to make an issue part of their campaign must connect the issue to the candidate, the office, and important consequences for the voter. To communicate their opinions rapidly, candidates and their strategists search for concrete symbols that serve as information shortcuts, as cognitive placeholders and focal points, to their position on larger abstract problems. These symbols must also appeal to many different types of voters. For some the symbol will be but the tip of an intellectual iceberg, while for others it may be all they know. The Panama Canal symbolized a host of issues involving America's relations with the "third world" for some voters, while for others it was a beloved part of the American heritage, like the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, or Rockefeller Center.

The connections between data and office and policy are far easier to grasp when they are evoked by a specific concrete symbol. In 1976, New York City's brush with bankruptcy was easier to grasp than discussions of fiscal responsibility, bond ratings, and future solvency. In 1957, the flight of Sputnik raised more alarm about Soviet military power than reports on Russian military spending. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a direct use of Russian troops, raised more concern about the Soviets than their proxy interventions in Angola and Mozambique and Ethiopia, because the proxy interventions were easy for many to shrug off as exaggerated cries of "wolf" at a time when many people had decided that the costs of involvement in third-world brush fires were higher than the benefits. Clear, direct events like Sputnik and Afghanistan are more likely to become part of campaigns because they are more clearly and simply connected with national defense and security than other, more serious, foreign actions. Sputnik made candidate John Kennedy's baseless charges of a missile gap credible. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan created more support for President Reagan's greatly increased defense budget than all the stories about SS-20s, throw weight, and hardened silos.

Campaigns communicate, when they are successful, by linking symbols which are already clear and well known. Fiscal conservatives warned for years about the disasters that would befall American cities if they did not change their profligate ways of welfare spending, union pampering, and patronage. New York City's fiscal crisis was a watershed event that became a referent for every presidential candidate in 1976. Many other cities were in deep financial trouble, but it was the plight of New York that became the focal point of the tightfisted fiscal mood that prevailed throughout the country after the first oil shocks of the 1970s. When Gerald Ford refused federal aid to the city, in large part to cover his conservative flanks in the Republican primaries, the headline put out by the *New York Daily News*, FORD TO NEW YORK: DROP DEAD, was reproduced throughout the country and displayed prominently on television. Ronald Reagan told his supporters, "I have included in my morning and evening prayers every day, the prayer that the federal government not bail out New York."⁹ George Wallace observed, "The City of New York has taken the advice of the *New York Times* all these years and has finally gone completely broke. The least thing we can say about Alabama is that we're not about to close down."¹⁰ In 1982, when unemployment was the highest it had been for fifty years, the symbol of President Reagan's alleged indifference to the working person was the new White House china service that his wife purchased for state occasions at a cost of \$250,000.¹¹

Much opposing campaign rhetoric in any election focuses on the same symbols. Both candidates talk at length about peace, prosperity, or arms control. From all this talk about symbols over which there is no disagreement, some scholars conclude that voters are not concerned with policies or the benefits they derive from government actions.¹² Even when the two candidates discuss the same symbol, they are debating whose definition, whose performance, and whose approach is better.

Ironically, the slogan "Mother, God, and Country," which arose in the 1950s to denigrate politics as entirely symbolic and devoid of policy concern, lists symbols for three of the most divisive issues of the 1970s and 1980s. The nature of motherhood was the core issue in acrimonious debates about abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the proper role of women in the labor force and in the family.¹³ The proper role of God and religion in society sparked battles about the Moral Majority, homosexuality, fundamentalist and mainstream churches, sex education, and private schools. The nature of patriotism and how it was defined became a battle over the role of force, whether Vietnam was a "noble cause," and whether the UN should be allowed to practice "anti-Americanism." Even the debate over the appropriate Vietnam memorial reflected these undercurrents; to say that it was lacking in depth or politics simply because no one opposed "honoring war dead" is a serious misreading of politics. Does anyone believe that when George McGovern and Ronald Reagan both say "No more Vietnams," they are saying the same thing to voters? And finally, whether the Constitution should be altered to forbid desecration of the flag was one of the most difficult issues for politicians who supported free speech to deal with in 1990.

Rather than using factual arguments against one symbol, campaign strategists often attempt to counter it with another symbol. An example of fighting one symbol with another is Carter's use of the Camp David talks against Reagan's references to U.S. hostages taken by Iran. Carter argued that Camp David stood for prestige and progress toward peace, whereas the hostages were a minor issue that would be solved. The welfare cheat versus the hungry child and the \$600 ashtray versus Star Wars are also examples of symbols being used against each other. When Republicans argued in 1982 that the social "safety net" was intact and that only waste and fraud had been eliminated from the welfare budget, Democrats illustrated the callousness of the cut by holding up the symbol of a Chicano (read "not black") Congressional Medal of Honor winner who had lost his disability benefits but could not work. Similarly, when right-to-life advocates use the helpless fetus as a symbol of the victims of abortion, pro-choice advocates

counter not with arguments about fetal viability but with the image of the rape or incest victim or the teenage mother.

All principles have exceptions and voters are therefore inconsistent, but this does not mean that principles are of no consequence to them. Their reliance upon principles and symbols is another form of information cost-saving, and the contradictions mean only that the world is complex. Just as our party identification can remind us what to do when we have no other information, our symbols and principles orient us when we have no other information. The inconsistencies that exist between the general and the particular are what make campaigns and the choice of issues and symbols so important.

Some of the premises on which Americans base their political reasoning are so universal, and so deeply felt, that they are noticed only by an outsider from a society that operates on different assumptions. In the 1840s, when a friend wrote Alexis de Tocqueville to ask what he had learned about American beliefs, Tocqueville noted particularly how the American attitude toward education was linked to the belief in democracy:

You ask me in your last letter if there are *beliefs* here. . . . What strikes me is that the immense majority of people are united in regard to certain *common opinions*. . . . That the majority can be fooled once, no one denies, but people think that necessarily in the long run the majority is right, that it is not only the sole legal judge of its interests but also the surest and most infallible judge. The result of this idea is that enlightenment must be diffused widely among the people, that one cannot enlighten the people too much. You know how many times we have been anxious (we and a thousand others) to know if it is desirable or fearful for education to penetrate through all ranks of society. This question, which is so difficult for France to resolve, does not even seem to present itself here. I have already posed this question a hundred times to the most reflective men; . . . to them even stating the question had something shocking and absurd about it.¹⁴

Our symbols and premises, such as a belief in the absolute value of education, are the assumptions we make when there is no further information. Reactions are most visceral and violent when deeply felt assumptions are challenged. Such challenges threaten moral and intellectual chaos from the loss of sustaining and orienting principles.¹⁵ Two examples will suffice. After World War II it was assumed by many that America was secure because our superior technology assured us a monopoly on nuclear weap-

ons.¹⁶ Thus, when Russia did explode a nuclear device, it was taken for granted that the Russian breakthrough had been made possible only by espionage. The question was not whether there was a spy, but who the spy was. Similarly, millions of Americans were deeply committed through their church missionary activities to a future Christian China. When Communists won the civil war in China, the feeling of broken bonds for many Americans was so deep that the question was not a self-examining "How could we ever have believed in a Christian China?" but an angry "Who lost China?"¹⁷

Most people may not have specific or even accurate knowledge about the details of legislation or public policy, but they have deeply held views that influence their reactions to public policy. During the energy crisis, general attitudes about corporations and the fairness of corporate profit levels were strongly related to opinions about whether the profit on a gallon of gas was too high and whether the large oil companies should be broken up.¹⁸ There was no relation, however, between whether respondents had accurate knowledge of corporate profits, or of oil-company profits, and their opinions about government policy toward the oil companies. Similarly, when there is a toxic-waste spill today, many Americans assume the corporation guilty until proven innocent, and others assume the corporation innocent until proven guilty.

When there is a protest in the United States against an autocratic foreign leader, such as Diem, Rhee, Somoza, the Shah of Iran, or Ferdinand Marcos, some Americans assume, without any information, that the protesters are idealists with legitimate grievances and are worthy of support. Others, without any more information, assume that the protesters are Communists, or at least their dupes, and that the grievances are therefore phony or exaggerated. When Bernhard Goetz shot four black youths on a New York subway and became an instant celebrity, attitudes about his presumed innocence or guilt depended on deeper attitudes about race, crime, and guns.

Depending on the distribution of opinion about the underlying assumptions, one side in a campaign debate will have the wind at its back, and the other will have to work doubly hard to make its case an exception to the general rule. And these general rules or prevailing sentiments are themselves changed by clear and dramatic events. The Vietnamese boat people and the Ayatollah Khomeini each changed the center of gravity on U.S. demonstrations in favor of third-world movements, and the Three Mile Island, Bhopal, and Exxon Valdez calamities hardened attitudes on corporate responsibility for health and safety. It is harder today than in 1970 to argue

for support for a third-world movement (except for the African National Congress) or for a relaxation of toxic-waste controls.

Corporations, unions, computers, welfare cheats, and \$600 ashtrays become important symbols in politics because they are so easily grasped that candidates can use them as focal points to organize debate. These symbols, and well-placed phrases like "There you go again," also have an important sustaining effect, keeping memories of a speech or a position alive long after remembrance of specifics has faded.

Changing Constituencies

In both primary and general elections, a presidential candidate faces new opponents and new constituencies. The constituency of his or her home state differs from the constituency of the party primary, which in turn differs from the constituency of the presidency. The candidate's opponents also differ from home state to primary to general election. Since changing the constituency or changing the opponent changes the way a candidate will be viewed by voters, candidates are constantly making decisions about how to position themselves as they adapt to new contexts. Adapting includes choosing which issues to emphasize, which symbols to use, and when to change position on an issue.

Traditional academic theories of elections have emphasized that a candidate's main strategy option is deciding which position to take on an issue. However, as they change constituencies and try to appeal to new groups, candidates can change their own positions, minimize their distance from new groups, multiply issues and symbols, or try to push the other candidate away from the majority opinion.

Moving to new positions creates new problems. A candidate whose positions and emphases were developed to win a Democratic or Republican primary will want to change some positions, or at least some emphases, for the general election; but doing so will confuse supporters, divide the party base, and make a candidate look like an unprincipled opportunist—and politicians who flip-flop on issues are among the most popular targets of attack in American politics.

Instead of changing long-held positions, a candidate can stand fast and argue that he or she is not as far from voters as they had thought. Ronald Reagan showed in 1980 that it was not necessary to move to the center, wherever that was, to become president. He simply argued that he was not as far from the mainstream as he had been portrayed. He also argued that Jimmy Carter was farther from voters than they had realized. As Roger

Ailes defined his role as strategist for George Bush in 1988 against Michael Dukakis, "Every single thing I did from debates to rhetoric to speeches to media was designed to define the two of them and push them farther apart."¹⁹

Campaigns and Issue Salience

The Columbia studies of the 1940 and 1948 campaigns looked only at the last stages of the presidential campaign and ignored variables we now know to be critical to the importance of an issue. We now know of three ways in which campaigns can increase the importance of an issue: (1) by increasing the perceived importance of an issue; (2) by strengthening the connections between an issue and an office; and (3) by increasing the perceived differences between the candidates on an issue. The second and third, though not considered in the original Columbia studies, naturally complement the original work and follow from information shortcuts and framing.

The original studies by the Columbia sociologists showed that campaigns can increase the importance of an issue in an election by raising its perceived importance among voters. Campaigns activated old attitudes and changed the salience of different issues—by moving voters from a primary concern with international affairs to a primary concern with domestic programs, for example. Campaigns, they found, did not change attitudes as often as they changed priorities.

When *Voting* said that not all voters were voting *on* the same election, that meant that many members of the same party did not share the same issue priorities. Since people identified with a party because of its stance in different past elections, there were differences within the party on what were the most important issues. There were also disagreements within the party on issues; what unified members of a party before the election was that they were all opposed to the other party on some issue that mattered to them. As the campaign brought forth issues from both sides, the parties had to remind voters of the positive side of their own party.

Giving voters a positive view of their own party meant, in particular, selling voters on issues where they did not initially agree with their own party. When the campaign was effective in converting voters—in getting them to vote against their party loyalty or against the party for whom they had voted in the prior election—it was effective because it succeeded in reinforcing the importance of secondary issues.

Defection was related to the salience of core party issues, compared to secondary issues or new issues. In 1948 there were many Democrats who

supported their party on New Deal issues and disagreed with their party's positions on civil rights or emerging cold war issues. There were also many Republicans who supported their party's positions on cold war issues but supported the Democrats on domestic, New Deal issues.²⁰ Whether these voters voted for their own or for the opposition party depended on the priorities they assigned to each set of issues. *Voting* tracked the changes over the course of the campaign and found that the aggregate changes followed initial policy priorities. "In other words, voters with an attitudinal foot in each camp, so to speak, tend to choose the party that corresponds to their own positions on those issues to which they assign particular weight."²¹

Thus *Voting* found that the most important effects of the campaign were related to the salience of issues. Voters whose issue saliences before the campaign were not supportive of their standing decision about party preference were moved by the campaign to vote their priorities. Further, there were voters whose priorities were changed by the campaign, and who voted their priorities. The important effects of the campaign, then, were not in changing attitudes, but in changing priorities.²²

Second, the campaign can increase the importance of an issue by connecting it with a particular office. The Columbia researchers presumed that in 1948 voters connected the issues of the day, namely the cold war and the New Deal, with the office of the president. They did not bother to study ways in which the campaign may have affected the perceived importance of issues by making a connection for voters between the issue and the office. Thus they ignored the possibility that the reason domestic issues were more influential after the campaign was that the campaign connected issues the voters already cared about with the actions and office of the president. Harry Truman's campaign speeches reminded black audiences, for example, that it was an executive order that began the desegregation of the armed forces.

Even for an office as prominent and well publicized as the presidency, voters do not automatically connect relatively important parts of the national political agenda with the president. Thus, even during the energy crisis of the late 1970s, many voters who cared about energy policies connected them with the presidency only when news stories explicitly reminded them of the connections. The research of Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, discussed in chapter 4, confirms this; the connections between problems and offices are a variable that is affected by communications, and therefore by campaigns.

Third, the campaign can increase the importance of an issue by increasing the perceived differences between the candidates on an issue. The

Columbia researchers simply assumed that the long-standing, traditional positions of the parties and the perceived positions of the parties' presidential nominees were synonymous. And they did not study ways in which campaigns may provide information that alters voters' perceptions of the differences between the candidates on an issue. But we now know that the salience of an issue may change when voters acquire new information about the candidates during the campaign.

In 1952, for example, many voters who perceived a large difference between Democrats and Republicans on support for New Deal programs like Social Security may have grown less concerned about a rollback of the New Deal as they learned more about General Eisenhower, who had never been associated with the more virulent Republican attacks on Social Security and unions. In other words, new information may have moved Eisenhower away from the "default value," or preexisting image held in the absence of other information, that voters assumed for the Republican position on the New Deal programs in the absence of new information about the candidate. Although candidates today are generally given more exposure before nominations, campaign information is just as likely to move voters' perceptions of where a candidate stands on an issue closer to their perceptions of long-standing party positions. Jimmy Carter was a southern governor, assumed to be different from recent Democratic nominees like George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey. After the Democratic convention of 1976 showed Carter and Humphrey praising each other and Carter choosing the northerner Walter Mondale as his vice president, perceptions of Carter changed, moving him closer to the "default value" voters had for the party.

When little information about candidates is available, the policy perceptions of voters are based on relevant party images. However, if there is substantial information about the candidates, then perceptions based on party images will be modified during the campaign as perceptions based on candidates replace them. This conclusion suggests that nominating conventions are still important in an age when the nominees have already been determined earlier, by primaries. From conventions, voters get information that helps them locate candidates within the party (by showing them in relation to party figures they already know something about) and form an opinion about what their future programs are likely to be.

Tamales and Helicopters Reconsidered

The tamales and helicopters introduced in the Prologue were important symbols that require cognitive and economic principles for their explana-

tion. They connected presidential candidates to important concerns of voters. They were information shortcuts with symbolic meaning, and they were both predicated upon views of how government works and what the president can do.

In 1976, when President Ford tried to eat an unshucked tamale, he committed a faux pas far more serious than spilling mustard on his tie or ice cream on his shirt. To Hispanic voters in Texas, he betrayed an unfamiliarity with their food which suggested a lack of familiarity with their whole culture. Further, tamales were a way of projecting from the personal to the political, of assuming that personal familiarity with a culture and the acceptability of a candidate's policies to a group were linked.

In 1980, the helicopters that crashed in the abortive desert rescue mission symbolized President Carter's failure to bring the hostages home from Iran. The hostages were a powerful symbol of American weakness and humiliation, a personalization of foreign policy, because they were individuals with whom Americans could directly identify, enduring a situation in which most Americans could picture themselves. Further, rightly or wrongly, the hostage question was assumed to be a clear and detachable aspect of foreign policy—unclouded by treaties, bureaucracies, and the layers of government—directly within the purview of the president, so that an inability to bring the hostages home reflected directly on his competence.

In similar fashion, many Americans picture state governors as directly responsible for all pardons and furloughs handed out to prisoners, as in the old Jimmy Cagney gangster movies where suspense builds while the governor decides whether to stay an execution. The release of Willie Horton on furlough was effective against Michael Dukakis in 1988 because furloughs, pardons, and death penalties are to governors what hostages are to presidents.²³

Symbols like tamales and helicopters, and memorable rejoinders like "There you go again," lay down traces that are activated when subsequent events provide reminders.²⁴ Sometimes these symbols can even re-create our memories, literally "inventing" our history. By way of illustration, I note how Robert Darnton, the distinguished French historian who has contributed so much to our understanding of popular culture, has inadvertently demonstrated the power of Edmund Blair Bolles's insight that "memory is an act of imagination."²⁵ Commenting upon the unraveling of Communist rule in East Germany, Darnton wrote, "The hunting lodges have doomed the Communists in the GDR just as Imelda Marcos' shoe collection delegitimized the dictatorship in the Philippines and Marie

Antoinette's diamond necklace brought down the monarchy in France."²⁶ The luxurious hunting lodges of the Communist leadership were publicized when the Communist party was already reeling from mass protests, and this publicity may have helped doom the Communists. But Imelda Marcos's three thousand pairs of shoes—now taken as the single most powerful image of the Marcos dictatorship—were not discovered until *after* the Marcos family had fled the country and the presidential palace was occupied by forces loyal to the new government. This illustrates how, in remembering, we often revise chronology to let a single symbolic event carry the meaning of a complex process. Memory is an act of imagination, and so the shoes can dominate earlier individual memories of the Marcos dictatorship, and the temporal sequence of events becomes reversed in our minds—as in Darnton's analysis, when the shoes that were discovered after the overthrow come to symbolize the reason why the Marcoses were overthrown. The overthrow was a collective action, and collective actions call common symbols to mind; "our last straw" supplanted "my last straw" after the fact. People think in terms of causal schemas, but we generally store schemas with a single cause. If different people had different causes it would be harder to store and use the memories.

If Imelda's shoes can symbolize the reasons for the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, it is understandable that journalists and scholars would attribute Senator Edward Kennedy's fall, when the 1980 primaries began in 1979, to a poor performance in an interview with Roger Mudd. Kennedy led Jimmy Carter in the primary preference polls throughout 1978 and 1979 before he actually declared his candidacy on November 7, 1979. Three days before that, on a Sunday evening, an interview with the senator by Roger Mudd of CBS News was shown nationally. Kennedy provided no new information about Chappaquiddick (a muted scandal from his past); when asked why he wanted to be president, he was silent for nine seconds before beginning his answer—and on television, nine seconds is a lot of "dead air." That interview has been credited by academics, campaign strategists, and journalists alike with a critical role in Kennedy's poor showing in the primaries and in the drop in his personal popularity.²⁷ Millions of people, when they began to think about Kennedy, Chappaquiddick, and the presidency, began to have doubts. What better common event with which to express doubts felt by millions than an interview in which the senator himself seemed to reveal doubts? The fallacy here was to make the implicit assumption that a single new event was *necessary* to explain millions of individual changes of attitude. That the Kennedy-Mudd interview was given so much importance by so many scholars and campaign oper-

atives attests to the power of television, or at least to the power it is assumed to have. If the Kennedy-Mudd interview had never occurred, some other media event would have provided a television-oriented explanation for Kennedy's fall. The interview was singled out as the simplest, most economical explanation for a complicated process of change in voter attitudes.

Just as the Kennedy-Mudd interview and Imelda's shoes became focal points, Jimmy Carter's "lust in my heart" interview became the focal point in his 1976 campaign against President Ford. Carter gave an interview to *Playboy* magazine in which he confessed that despite his deep commitment to Christianity, he too sometimes had "lust in his heart." He gave the interview in a conscious attempt to allay fears of intolerance. His deep commitment as a "born-again Christian" was well known, and there was concern about whether his policies as president would reflect his religious commitment so strongly that he would launch divisive moral crusades. The juxtaposition of *Playboy* and Jimmy Carter was so startling that the interview confession quickly disseminated throughout the electorate.

However, like Imelda's shoes, Carter's lust became much more important in retrospect than it was at the time. For a month after the Republican convention of August 16–19 Carter had been falling in the polls; Ford was developing a more positive image and raising doubts about Carter's experience and his connections to traditional Democratic groups and programs. The interview, which was scheduled to appear in the November *Playboy*, made the national news on the evening of September 20, and appeared in newspapers for the first time on September 21.²⁸ Thus the interview became news after nearly all of Carter's fall in the polls had already taken place. In fact, three days later, on September 23, the first presidential debate was held, and attention shifted from the interview to the debate.

Campaign mythology necessarily overstates how much some of the memorable events matter, because the memorable event provides a credible and easily grasped symbol, a focal point to represent and explain a diffuse process. We use the essence of a process, a "critical event," to provide a common collective explanation or representation for earlier decisions by countless individuals. After the fact, these symbols serve to encapsulate the process better than anything we knew at the time. We can use such explanations credibly only because we believe in the power of images and the power of television.

Imelda's shoes, Kennedy's interview, and Carter's lust demonstrate two points. First, incidents become important only when they draw upon many other related incidents and concerns. Second, it is frequently the case that the many less dramatic incidents were the effective agents of change,

and the single dramatic incident becomes the archetypical incident only in our historical re-creation of the moment. Images matter, but they are based upon far more reasonable and defensible considerations than their specific content. As we develop a richer and fuller picture of the political reasoning that goes on within the mass electorate, I believe that we will see increasingly that there is less reason to attribute so much significance to trivial incidents.