



# The Reasoning Voter

Communication and  
Persuasion in Presidential  
Campaigns

**Samuel L. Popkin**

**SECOND EDITION**

"If you're preparing to run a presidential campaign, and only have time to read one book, make sure you read Sam Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter*. If you have time to read two books, read *The Reasoning Voter* twice."

Political Science

*The Reasoning Voter* is an insider's look at campaigns, media, and voters that convincingly argues that voters make reasoned choices. Samuel L. Popkin analyzes three primary campaigns—Carter in 1976; Bush and Reagan in 1980; and Hart, Mondale, and Jackson in 1984—to arrive at a new model of the way voters sort through commercials and sound bites to choose a candidate. This second edition includes a new chapter focusing on the 1992 presidential campaign and how an “unelectable Bill Clinton” defeated the “unbeatable George Bush.” Drawing on insights from economics and cognitive psychology, Popkin demonstrates that, as trivial as campaigns often appear, they provide voters with a surprising amount of information on a candidate's views and skills. For all their shortcomings, campaigns do matter.

“If you're preparing to run a presidential campaign, and only have time to read one book, make sure you read Sam Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter*. If you have time to read two books, read *The Reasoning Voter* twice.”

—James Carville, Senior Strategist, Clinton/Gore '92

“A rigorous, refreshing rebuttal of conventional thinking, the book argues that Americans take more than echoes of slogans and sound-bites into the voting booth.”

—Robert Schmuhl, *Chicago Tribune*

“A fresh and subtle analysis of voter behavior.”

—Thomas Byrne Edsall, *New York Review of Books*

“An important book for anyone who wants to understand or influence contemporary American presidential elections.”

—Scott L. Feld, *Contemporary Sociology*

“*The Reasoning Voter* is a marvelous combination of simple common sense and sophisticated scholarship on voting behavior. Popkin has a simple message: voters can figure out a great deal about politics by using small scraps of information and their native intelligence.”

—Henry E. Brady, University of California at Berkeley

SAMUEL L. POPKIN is professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego. He served as a polling consultant to the CBS News election unit from 1983 to 1990, and assisted on polling and strategy in the McGovern, Carter, and Clinton campaigns.

Cover design: Toni Ellis.

The University of Chicago Press

[www.press.uchicago.edu](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

ISBN 0-226-67545-9



9 780226675459

Gary Cox and Don Kinder were brutally helpful with their ongoing readings of various drafts of this book. Don was particularly helpful with my attempts to absorb contemporary voting research. Knowing that anytime he found serious fault with logic or exposition, I would be back for another reading, Gary still maintained his standards. Larry Bartels and Henry Brady were good-natured and tolerant about my attempts to deal with their research and explain verbally the nuances of primary dynamics. Their help exceeded reasonable expectations and gave me momentum. John Aldrich, Michael Alvarez, Dick Brody, Paul Chan, James S. Coleman, Norman Frohlich, Gary Jacobson, Shanto Iyengar, Sam Kernell, Jon Krosnick, Sandy Lakoff, Simon Lazarus, Skip Lupia, Mat McCubbins, Joe Oppenheimer, Nathan J. Winograd, Aaron Wildavsky, and Ken Williams all provided me readings which helped me sharpen my arguments and clarify their relations to existing voting studies. That means they all found things I had left out or done poorly; none of them made it easier, but they all helped me make it better.

Chuck Nathanson pushed me time and again to clarify the links between my research and larger questions about American politics. Alan Houston, Victor Magagna, and Tracy Strong suggested implications of my analysis for democratic theory. David Laitin and Michael Schudson helped me connect the research to larger questions of social theory. Jay McClelland introduced me to Daniel Kahneman, who was a patient tutor on the nuances of his work. James Morris and Robert Tyson introduced me to relevant psychoanalytic insights and helped me think through their implications.

Reuben Rosen and Judy McTigue helped with research; Reuben was also a great help with organization. Gene Tanke was an exacting copy-editor and Joan Brun patiently kept track of the many drafts and revisions. John Tryneski helped, from the earliest drafts, to structure and focus the book, to make it focus on the future instead of the past. I am grateful to him for his faith in this project. Salena Fuller Krug edited the final copy and Robert Krug clarified the tables.

My children, Lucy and David Popkin, were encouraging throughout, cheering every milestone and reminding me why I care about the state of American government and the outcome of our campaigns. My aunt Jeanette Popkin spent countless Saturday and Sunday mornings with them so my wife and I could simultaneously finish books. That we did so with so little strain speaks to her good cheer and to the special qualities of our nanny-of-all-trades, Mary Tschosik. Finally, Susan Shirk, my wife, has been my partner through this all.

## Prologue

AFTER President Gerald Ford lost the presidential election to Jimmy Carter, he was asked to name the most important lesson he had learned from his campaign. He answered, "Always shuck your tamales."<sup>1</sup>

During the 1976 primary campaign, President Ford was attacked by challenger Ronald Reagan on the issue of negotiations with the government of Panama, begun by President Carter, to turn over management and control of the canal to the Panamanian government. Reagan's assault was clear and direct: "We built it, we paid for it, and we're gonna keep it." The Ford campaign countered this attack with John Wayne, who was featured prominently in commercials supporting the canal negotiations. Still, Reagan's use of the canal issue was proving effective. Before the Texas primary, he was ahead of the president in the polls, and since Texas was too important to concede to Reagan, Ford was making an energetic effort to win enough delegates to derail him. Ford's campaign targeted the city of San Antonio, where, his strategists reasoned, Mexican-American voters were more likely to support negotiations with Panama. With roots in Mexico, they would not believe that the canal negotiations were either humiliating or a giveaway, or that a canal treaty was just one more setback for post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America.

Predictably enough, the San Antonio rally for President Ford featured Mexican food, and so the President of the United States was served his first tamale, a food not common in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or even in Washington, D.C. While reporters and television cameras recorded the scene, Ford proceeded with gusto to bite into the tamale, corn husk and all.

Videotapes and still photos of this gastronomic gaffe were used throughout the country and on network news broadcasts. The *New York Times* found it news fit to print on the front page. The accompanying photo showed Ford as he put the tamale in his mouth, with this caption: "CAMPAIGNING IN TEXAS: President Ford starting to eat a hot tamale during a visit

to the Alamo yesterday. The snack was interrupted after the first bite so that his hosts could remove the corn shucks which serve as a wrapper and are not supposed to be consumed."<sup>2</sup>

Ford was not the first candidate to encounter trouble with unfamiliar food. In 1972, during the New York primaries, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota was courting the Jewish vote, trying to demonstrate his sympathy for Israel. As Richard Reeves wrote for *New York* magazine in August,

During one of McGovern's first trips into the city he was walked through Queens by City Councilman Matthew Troy and one of their first stops was a hot dog stand. "Kosher?" said the guy behind the counter, and the prairie politician looked even blanker than he usually does in big cities. "Kosher!" Troy coached him in a husky whisper. "Kosher and a glass of milk," said McGovern.<sup>3</sup>

Worse yet, McGovern and his staff decided that he should make his Israel speech in a synagogue on a Friday night. It took New York Democrats three days to explain to them why a political speech could not be given in a synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath.<sup>4</sup>

Would a Mexican-American voter who saw President Ford bite into an unshucked tamale be wrong to conclude that the president had little experience with Mexican-American culture, little feel for it? Would a Jewish voter who saw George McGovern order a kosher hot dog and a glass of milk, and plan to talk politics in a synagogue on a Friday night, be wrong to conclude that the good senator knew little about Jews and Jewish concerns?

There is a wonderful treatise to be written someday about the role of food in American political campaigns. No serious candidate for president can rest secure in his knowledge of the intricacies of Iowa agriculture or New Hampshire environmentalism; he must master ethnic food as well. At the minimum, he (or she) must know how to use chopsticks; how to shuck tamales; how to open a lobster; how to eat ribs; how to eat pasta standing up without getting sauce on his tie (or her blouse); and when it is permissible to drink milk in a kosher deli. And failing a plausible defense of abstinence for reasons of religion or health, the candidate must be able to drink green beer, dark beer, sweet kosher wine, wine spritzers, retsina, and sake. The candidate also must show familiarity with deli food, Chinese food, soul food and barbecue, corned beef and cabbage, sauerkraut and wurst, souvlaki and baklava, pizza, sushi, quiche, and—of course—tamales and tacos.

In a multiethnic, polyglot society, with its inevitable bigotries and prejudices, showing familiarity with a voter's culture is an obvious and easy test of ability to relate to the problems and sensibilities of the ethnic group and to understand and care about them. Incidents involving such tests illustrate the kinds of *cues* that voters use to make judgments on the fly—judgments, I will argue, that need to be taken seriously in order to understand voters and campaigns.

Tamale shucking is not, of course, the best test of a candidate's policy stands on income redistribution, nuclear disarmament, and foreign trade. But neither is it merely symbolism, devoid of content and without meaning for the political process. The effects a president has on the benefits enjoyed by the citizenry go far beyond policies: a president provides moral and social cues to the country. American presidential elections integrate the country and provide the common symbols which inform public discourse. A president who understands and is familiar with an ethnic group is more likely to help ease that group's way into the American mainstream, and will make open disparagement of that group less acceptable. A president with friends from such a group is more likely to understand its sensibilities and the ways that presidential behavior affects them than one who doesn't even know how to cope with their foods.<sup>5</sup> Such cues are taken seriously enough in other contexts; when the Senate considers a candidate for the Supreme Court, membership in exclusionary country clubs or lodges is often given as much serious consideration as are the judge's opinions.

In 1988, when Michael Dukakis, governor of Massachusetts, picked Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas as his vice-presidential nominee, there were more than a few ruffled feathers between Dukakis and Jesse Jackson. Jackson, Dukakis, and a few top aides met to clear the air and negotiate a role for Jackson at the convention and in the fall campaign. Senator Bentsen joined the group, and, according to Jackson, "saved the meeting." He did so, Jackson said, because "he understands coalitions and constituencies. . . . He can go from biscuits to tacos to caviar real fast, knowing that's just the cultural diversity that makes up America." Bentsen, Jackson noted, "knew instinctively if you go and campaign among Hispanics, [you] talk Spanish and eat tacos, or [you] go over to the Black side of town and do a soul shake or some cultural expression, eat a biscuit." Jackson also noted that these things could be done without losing support elsewhere in the electorate. As these comments implied, a politician like McGovern, who lacked such skills, would have to try to demonstrate familiarity and commitment with awkward promises that would cost him support elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Ford's admonition to "always shuck your tamales" shows how concerned campaigners can be with media emphasis on personal behavior. Of course, it shows only that candidates perceive such incidents to be important; it does not demonstrate that they actually affect any votes or even affect attitudes about the candidate. As I will show, however, campaigners are right to be concerned; campaign incidents like these sometimes do have large electoral effects. A book about campaigns ought to be able, along the way, to analyze this concern and provide a way for understanding and evaluating when and why such incidents will matter.

In a postmortem of the 1980 election, Gerald Rafshoon, who had done most of the advertising for Jimmy Carter in 1976 and 1980, and who had been on the White House staff as a senior adviser to improve the president's "communications" (image), was asked about the effectiveness of the Carter advertising he had done in 1980. He answered, "If we had it to do all over again, we would take the 30 million dollars we spent in the campaign and get three more helicopters for the Iran rescue mission."<sup>7</sup> He was referring, of course, to the effort to rescue the fifty-five Americans held hostage in the American embassy in Teheran, Iran. The rescue attempt was aborted when defective helicopters forced the mission to turn back from its desert rendezvous outside Teheran.

Rafshoon's comment about the relative value of an abortive rescue mission and an entire year's advertising is an important reminder of the possible limits of image-making in the face of "political reality." Thirty million dollars' worth of political advertising was more than offset in his mind by the negative effect on the Carter campaign of the failed rescue mission and the ongoing hostage crisis.

Although Rafshoon's comment about the hostage crisis specifically emphasizes only the limits of television *advertising*, the crisis also provides a powerful example of the effect television news can have on a campaign. The first anniversary of the seizure by Iranian students of fifty-five hostages in the American embassy in Teheran coincided with the Sunday before the 1980 presidential election. As the hostage-crisis focus of recent television news reached a peak, reminding Americans of a yearlong humiliation, Sunday's NFL games were interrupted for news bulletins on the hostage anniversary and the possibilities for imminent release. Voters began thinking more about the failings of the Carter administration and less about the risks of Ronald Reagan, whose economic, social, and military policies had worried many voters. A choice between two futures became, for many, a referendum on the past four years, and Carter fell 10 points behind Reagan

in forty-eight hours. What had been a close campaign became a major electoral rout for Carter and the Democratic party.<sup>8</sup>

Rafshoon's comparison of the relative value of campaign advertising and presidential accomplishments probably reveals more than he intended. His offhanded equation of campaign events and international military missions emphasizes how political campaigns and governance merge in the minds of some of the key players in a campaign; foreign policy is seen as part and parcel of a reelection effort—no different from campaign speeches, patronage, and pork barrel. Indeed, in recent history we have seen many small rescue raids that in retrospect appear more related to domestic politics than to any international concerns. Under President Ford, forty-one men were killed or missing in action as a result of the rescue of crewmen from the freighter *Mayaguez*.<sup>9</sup> Under President Nixon, the military raided an empty North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp at Son Tay. Under President Reagan, American medical students were "rescued" from Grenada. Perhaps most notably, the Reagan White House and National Security Council staffers such as Oliver North were obsessed with obtaining the release of American hostages held in Lebanon, and were even willing to trade arms—that is, pay ransom—to Iran in order to do so. A theory of voting and campaigning must be able to explain the electoral rationale for such raids and the role they play in campaigns.

Should incidents involving tamales and helicopters even be relevant to choosing the leader of "the greatest show on earth"? Should the Panama Canal and hostages in Lebanon, instead of energy crises and OPEC or domestic issues, be at the center of a presidential campaign? In the 1976 Republican primary, the Panama Canal treaty was discussed more than any domestic issue or any other foreign-policy topic except the Soviet Union and détente.<sup>10</sup> What is more important, substance or style?

The routine answer used to be that issue assessments were a more substantial basis for judging presidents than character or style. But if concern with personal style and competence can turn into an ethnic-food contest, concern with policy choices can lead to demagoguery over a Panama Canal treaty. As Richard Fenno trenchantly notes, issue voting can be corrupted just as easily as voting on character and style:

Normative theorists . . . have a tendency to think of policy congruence as the only legitimate basis for representation, and to denigrate extrapolicy bases of representation as "symbolic." . . . It may be objected that a search for support that stresses stylistic compatibilities . . . easily degenerates

into pure image selling. And, of course, it may. But the search for support that emphasizes policy compatibilities . . . easily degenerates into pure position taking. . . . Position taking is just as misleading to constituents and as manipulative of their desires as image selling. It may be just as symbolic as any form of candidate advertising.<sup>11</sup>

As we study campaigns, we cannot equate the divide between fluff and substance with the divide between the personal character of the candidate and the public importance of issues. When a George Wallace crowns a beauty queen who is black, or a Rockefeller eats a knish, each man is communicating important changes in his relations with and attitudes about ethnic or religious minorities. When the southern governor who promised "segregation forever" congratulates a homecoming queen who is black, does this have less significant implications for policy than posturing about gun control or drug control?

Failed missions to rescue hostages and failed attempts to eat tamales are similar: the same basic principles drawn from economics and psychology can help us understand both the concern with tamales and the campaign temptations to conduct rescue missions and covert activities.

In this book I use some basic principles of economics and psychology to reexamine most of our conventional wisdom about campaigns, and most of our academic ideas about them as well. I have tried to steer a theoretical course between the approaches of campaigners and journalists on one hand and those of political scientists and media scholars on the other. The contributions of each have been valuable, and I hope this book will encourage them to continue this dialogue.

## O N E

*The Reasoning Voter*

THIS BOOK has two main purposes. The first is to construct a general theory of voting that incorporates academic research of recent decades into a framework built from cognitive psychology, economics, and sociology. The second is to demonstrate the utility of that theory for analyzing political campaigns with three case studies.

I use the term *reasoning voter* because my theory recognizes that voters actually do reason about parties, candidates, and issues. They have premises, and they use those premises to make inferences from their observations of the world around them. They think about who and what political parties stand for; they think about the meaning of political endorsements; they think about what government can and should do. And the performance of government, parties, and candidates affects their assessments and preferences.

The term *low-information rationality*—popularly known as "gut" reasoning—best describes the kind of practical thinking about government and politics in which people actually engage. It is a method of combining, in an economical way, learning and information from past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaigns.

This reasoning draws on various information shortcuts and rules of thumb that voters use to obtain and evaluate information and to simplify the process of choosing between candidates. People use shortcuts which incorporate much political information; they triangulate and validate their opinions in conversations with people they trust and according to the opinions of national figures whose judgments and positions they have come to know. With these shortcuts, they learn to "read" politicians and their positions.

The better we understand voters and how they reason, the more sense campaigns make and the more we see how campaigns matter in a democracy. Academic studies of voting have begun to reveal more and more