



Communication Patterns in Presidential Primaries 1912-2000: Knowing the Rules of the Game

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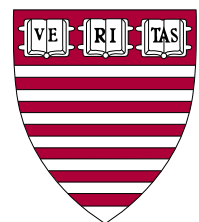
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IN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES
1912-2000:
Knowing the Rules of the Game**

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The Joan Shorenstein Center
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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES 1912-2000: KNOWING THE RULES OF THE GAME

by Kathleen E. Kendall

On opponents to the presidential primaries:

"[Their] feeling is that politics is a game, that the people should simply sit on the bleachers as spectators, and that no appeal lies to the people from the men who, for their own profit, are playing the game."

Theodore Roosevelt, March 8, 1912

Instituted as a sweeping reform in American politics, the presidential primaries were conceived in passionate democratic debate. Arguing that "the power to nominate is more important than the power to elect" (Eaton, 1912, pp. 109-112), reformers led by Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Sr. attempted to take power away from the party bosses and return it to the voters. The presidential primaries are a twentieth century phenomenon which grew out of the late nineteenth century tradition of party primaries on the local level. They are distinctly different from general elections because they are multiple, serial, and intraparty, with many candidates competing rather than just two.

This study examines the distinctive patterns of communication in presidential primaries, focussing especially on 1912, the first year of numerous primaries, and then primaries at twenty-year intervals after 1912: 1932, 1952, 1972 and 1992. Part I reports on the consistent patterns of communication found in primaries from their earliest days through 1992. Part II turns to communication in the 1996 primaries and the future, examining (a) the extent to which the communication patterns or rules used by candidates and the media in the past illuminate the 1996 primaries and those of the future, and (b) proposals for change.

Part I: Consistent Communication Patterns

The conventional wisdom about the presidential primaries contains the following premises. (1) Before 1972, the primaries were not routinely important, as the political parties controlled the

nomination process, and selected the nominee at the national nominating conventions. As columnist Jules Witcover said, it was "rare when [the primaries] were critical" (Forum, Dec. 9, 1997); Asher (1992) mentions the primaries of 1960 and 1964 as two such rare occasions. "Importance" in this reasoning has meant attaining the requisite number of delegates to achieve nomination at the convention. (2) Primaries first became important in 1972, when the rule reforms of the McGovern-Fraser Commission adopted by the Democratic Party shifted power away from the party leaders and to the candidates and voters (Bartels, 1988).¹ (3) Media coverage of the primaries changed with the advent of television, leading to a new focus on the campaign as a drama (Aldrich, 1980; Gronbeck, 1989; Bennett, 1996). (4) Another big change produced by television was that the candidates' personal traits rather than their ideas became the focus of media attention (Bennett, 1996; Gronbeck, 1989).

This paper will argue that prior research on the primaries underplays the power of language to create perceptions. Throughout the 1912-1992 period, the candidates and the media constructed a verbal context in which the primaries were of great importance. Those who ignore the public environment in which these events took place, the active efforts of candidates to inform and persuade through speeches and debates and political advertisements, and the media coverage of the primaries miss a major part of the story. An examination of candidate messages and news coverage of the primaries gives a new perspective.

It is certainly true that the rule changes which took effect in 1972 increased the power of the primaries particularly because there were so many primaries, because the results bound the delegates rather than being advisory, and because most states now listed the names of the candidates on the ballot. The sheer number of primaries (23 in 1972, 31 in 1976, etc.) stimulated the development of a "professional consulting cadre," because with so many more primaries, "the candidates needed more help" (Witcover, Forum, Dec. 9, 1997). However, this paper will argue

- that there is evidence of the primaries' importance at many points in the 1912-1972 period, long before the McGovern-Fraser

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Commission reforms took effect in 1972

- that the tendencies of the media to cover the primaries as a dramatic conflict or horse race, and to focus on the personal traits of the candidate were present throughout the period studied; they were not new in the Age of Television

- that a “powerful candidate” model based on candidate innovations often supplanted a “powerful media” model in the primaries.

Importance of the Primaries, 1912-1972

The presidential primaries were very “important” nationally in four of the five periods studied (1912, 1952, 1972, and 1992), and of regional importance in 1932. Primaries mattered to the candidates and the media in all of these years, and, by extension, to the voters, in ways not found in delegate counts alone. Candidates used the primaries to differentiate themselves from their opponents, to prove their vote-getting power to the party leaders, to build popular support, and to shape the way the media constructed the news agenda. Some candidates disappeared in the primaries, knocked out by an early defeat. Others were so bruised by the process that though nominated, they entered the fall election season at a distinct disadvantage. Patterson (1980) and others have found that among people who pay attention to the primaries, the views formed at that time remain consistent in the fall.

When primaries were contested, the media found them well-suited to their need for stories about famous people and conflict, and covered them heavily. The way the media portrayed the candidates, parties, and issues during the long primary period influenced the way the public viewed these matters in the fall. A party’s image might be harmed, for example, if the primary coverage revealed its “serious rifts and associations with extremism” (Ceaser and Busch, 1997, p. 83).

The voters were told from the start that the primaries were a chance for “the voice of the people” to be heard. When parties ignored the primary outcomes, another power of the primaries became evident: they aroused and built expectations in the voters which, if ignored, might cause problems in party unity. In 1912 and 1952, for example, the primary winners and frontrunners Theodore Roosevelt and Estes Kefauver² were cast aside by the party conventions, and other nominees were selected instead. In both cases, the parties lost resoundingly in the fall elections. Though other factors played a role

in these outcomes, it is clear that the enthusiasm and commitment to one candidate developed in the primary period does not automatically transfer to a rival candidate.

The first year of numerous primaries was 1912; there were between 13 and 21 primaries that year, depending upon how “primary” was defined.³ Candidates and media approached them much like the fall elections, with the assumption that they would be decisive. Republican candidates President William Howard Taft, former President Theodore Roosevelt, and Senator Robert LaFollette, and Democrats Governor Woodrow Wilson and Speaker Champ Clark clashed in most of the primaries, travelling from state to state giving speeches or having their surrogates speak for them, followed by an avid press contingent. Front page stories were the rule. When Roosevelt, in spite of winning all but two of the 1912 Republican primaries (North Dakota and a divided vote in Massachusetts), was shunted aside by the Taft-ruled party convention, reformers saw that the primary system did not work as they had intended: the party leaders still chose the candidate, ignoring the primaries. As head of the Republican Party, Taft knew the rules, and changed the rules: Taft-controlled state party chairmen simply replaced the Roosevelt delegates who had been elected in the primaries with slates of Taft delegates. Roosevelt railed in vain at this theft of his delegates, and after the convention he founded the Bull Moose Party. The resulting split in the Republican Party led to the election of a Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, in the fall. After an increase in the number of primaries to 23 in 1916, the reform impulse faded, and the primaries declined in importance and number; from 1924 through 1968, only approximately one-third of the states had primaries (Busch, 1997).

The next year examined was 1932. While the 1932 primaries were of diminished *national* importance, they were of clear *regional* importance to candidates, media, and voters. Unlike 1912, the candidates did not actively campaign. Their planning for the primaries, while rigorous (particularly in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s case) was a piece of their overall strategy to win party delegates in state conventions, primaries, and at the national convention. There were only a few states in which the main Democratic candidates, former Governor Al Smith and Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, competed on the same primary ballot (New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and California), and only one state, Maryland, where President Herbert Hoover

and Senator Joseph France competed on the same primary ballot. Yet when the outcome of the nomination battle was seen as uncertain, as it was with the Democrats, and the candidates or their surrogates engaged in an open clash, the regional media treated the primaries as front-page stories.⁴ This is seen most clearly in the Massachusetts coverage a week before the primary by the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Post*, and the *Boston Herald*, and in coverage of the Pennsylvania primary by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Twenty years later, in 1952, President Harry Truman announced that the primaries were just “eyewash,” and that the important decisions would be made at the party conventions (Lawrence, *New York Times*, February 1, 1952). He proved both right and wrong. The primaries did not determine who the nominees were in 1952; in both parties, that decision was made at the convention. But except for Truman, most of the candidates and the media treated the primaries as urgent matters, creating an ambiance of great importance. Party outsiders like Democratic Senator Estes Kefauver and Republican General Dwight D. Eisenhower (through surrogates) used the primaries to introduce themselves to the nation as serious candidates. And Senator Robert A. Taft, the consummate party insider, also campaigned furiously in the primaries to show that he could win.

The primaries in 1952, covered intensively on radio news and in newspapers, met the media’s needs for new stories. Primaries were regularly the top stories on NBC radio news just before and after each election day (Library of Congress Sound Division), and the *New York Times* averaged 8 primary stories a day in the March 4-13, 1952 period, with 15 stories and 4 pictures the day after the New Hampshire primary. When Eisenhower and Kefauver won the New Hampshire primary against party favorite Taft and incumbent President Truman, the results became the subject of widespread press interpretation. James Reston’s front-page column in the *New York Times* (March 13, 1952) said:

An electorate has to be pretty mad at a President or very favorably impressed with his opponent to turn out in driving sleet and snow and line up to mark what must be regarded as the most complicated political ballot in contemporary American history (pp. 1, 20).

Others who read significance into the results were the supporters of Governor Adlai E.

Stevenson. Despite Stevenson’s unwillingness to be a candidate, a group of committed supporters worked to keep his name prominent in the news during the primaries by running a secret campaign. Thus, while Kefauver “won twelve of fifteen preference primaries and 64 percent of the primary vote (there were also two pure delegate primaries)” (Busch, 1997, p. 133), with the accompanying headline attention, Stevenson’s supporters, through their connections in the press, succeeded in securing coverage for Stevenson from major news magazines and newspapers. The “Operation Wintergreen” campaign helped to ensure that his name remained “fresh” in the nomination battle (George A. Ball Papers, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University). In spite of Kefauver’s primary victories at the convention, the Democrats chose Stevenson as their nominee.

The next primary year examined, 1972, was affected by a major change in rules. With the thrust of the McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms, the primaries became so numerous (22 states and the District of Columbia) and binding that they decided who the nominees were: Nixon and McGovern. But it wasn’t only the power of numbers that made the 1972 primaries important. The candidates—thirteen in the Democratic Party—chose the primaries as their main route to the nomination. They actively campaigned, advertised heavily when they could afford to do so, and entered many primaries. The front-runner, Senator Edmund Muskie, entered all the primaries. Senator George McGovern, an outsider given little chance to win, became the eventual nominee largely because of his skillful primary campaigning and his thorough knowledge of the new party rules. Unlike President William Howard Taft in 1912, who had overturned the primary rules to assure his own nomination, McGovern helped write the rules in the first place in the McGovern-Fraser Commission following the 1968 Democratic convention, and hired several of its staff members as campaign aides.

The incumbent president in 1972, Richard Nixon, had only token opposition, which minimized the importance of the Republican primaries. However, Nixon carefully planned his own schedule to draw news coverage away from the Democrats, particularly through his historic trips to China and the Soviet Union, perfectly timed to compete for headlines with key Democratic primaries in New Hampshire and California.

Media coverage of the 1972 primaries was

active and opinionated. By the sheer time and space they gave to the primaries, the media treated them as important events, assigning reporters to follow the major candidates throughout the campaign. In both television news and newspapers, journalists showed a readiness to set the agenda. Journalists declared which primaries were important, which candidates were important, what the image traits of the candidates were, and what policy matters were important to the voters, as well as passing judgment on the success or failure of the candidates. They did this both in their choice of topics to cover and in their choice of language about each of these matters. This interpretive bent, and a touch of ridicule for the whole process, are reflected in the words of Eric Severeid of CBS after the Florida primary (March 15, 1972, Vanderbilt Television Archives):

In New Hampshire, Muskie won but lost, while McGovern lost but won; in Florida, Muskie lost but lost, McGovern lost but lost, Humphrey lost but won, and Wallace won but won.

In 1992, the pattern was the same as twenty years before: heavy media coverage of the contested primaries, i.e. the horse race. As soon as Clinton and Bush seemed to have an insurmountable lead in delegates, the coverage fell off; the rest of the primaries were treated as unimportant. On network news, the primary campaign was the lead story 35 percent of the time in the late January through early June 1992 period. These leads most frequently occurred in February and March, with coverage dropping in April, May, and June. No other news event in this period received coverage that was even close to this figure (Kendall, 1993).⁶

Dramatic Conflict and Image

The tendencies of the media both to cover the primaries as a dramatic conflict, and to focus on the personal traits of the candidates were present throughout the period studied; they were not new in the Age of Television. The main story in every primary studied was the contest. Thus it is not surprising that a consistently highlighted image trait across the primaries was that of the fighter, since exciting contests require fighters.

If there was no contest, there was no story. The situation of “no contest, no story” existed when any of these conditions applied:

a) only one major candidate entered the primary (Muskie in the 1972 Illinois primary);

b) more than one candidate entered the primary but one had what was perceived as an insurmountable lead nationally in the polls and delegates (Hoover in the 1932 Republican primaries);⁷ or

c) more than one major candidate appeared on the primary ballot, but there was no campaigning. For example, neither Roosevelt nor Smith campaigned in the 1932 Pennsylvania primary, and the press ignored the event most of the time, until a sudden clash developed which received heavy coverage.

There is no doubt that the media seized upon conflict wherever they found it. To what extent did political reporters actually generate conflict through their questioning of candidates? Throughout the primaries studied there were examples of reporters asking questions which “put the candidates on the spot,” pressing them about stark inconsistencies in their record or asking them to comment upon the latest attack made by their opponent. While challenging and provocative questions were found in earlier coverage of the primaries, there is evidence that what might be called the “Sam Donaldson phenomenon” increased sharply after the Vietnam War and Watergate. Donaldson, anchor for “Prime Time Live” and host and moderator for “This Week” on ABC, is known widely for his aggressive, confrontational treatment of candidates; he asks questions which seem calculated to produce angry, newsmaking responses. According to Kalb (1997), however, this type of hostile questioning has been relatively rare in the national press, but is magnified by heavy coverage.

Another important part of the dramatic conflict story is *numbers*.⁸ Candidates and media use numbers to measure the status of the conflict. Modern polling did not begin until 1935, when “George Gallup and Elmo Roper began publishing results obtained by the sampling method” (Cantril, 1951, p. vii). But the fixation on numbers by primary candidates and the press was evident much earlier. In the 1912 primaries, delegate count numbers were a common part of the campaign messages reported in the press, often frankly propagandistic exercises in wishful thinking by party leaders. Occasionally, polls by parties or newspapers also appeared as part of the campaign story. In 1932, the same pattern occurred. Roosevelt made skillful use of polls. His campaign hired Jesse I. Straus to conduct five polls among groups such as the delegates and alternates to the 1928 convention, among

small businessmen, and among other groups. Many newspapers and magazines also conducted polls (Peel and Donnelly, 1935).

In 1952, citation of polls was heavier, including names like Gallup and Roper which are familiar today. But the striking thing was not the use of polls, but the attention to numbers as a way of comparing the candidates' viability. For example, two *New York Times* stories on the primaries of March 6, 1952 cited numbers regarding the following topics: the number of signatures on filing applications for competing primary candidates, the number of delegates each candidate was going to file, the number of people in the crowds attending speeches by competing candidates, the number of miles the candidates had travelled during campaign trips, and the number of votes for each candidate in two polls conducted at the University of New Hampshire ("Jersey G.O.P. Gets Three-Way Choice"; Fenton, *New York Times*, March 6, 1952). By 1972, the main form of numbers used was polls, which were central to the campaign drama story. This tendency continued in 1992. With numerous candidates running in the primaries, there was wide latitude for interpretation of the polls.

There is a close relationship between the use of competing numbers and the portrayal of image traits of primary candidates. Ever-present in discussion of the candidates was the question, "Can this person win?" This was apparent in the ads and news coverage even in 1912, when a typical primary ad slogan read, "Vote for a Winner. Champ Clark, The People's Choice. Always a Democrat" (*Baltimore American*, May 3, 1912, page 1). The slogan for Clark's opponent was similar: "FOR WOODROW WILSON AND DEMOCRATIC VICTORY" (*The Salisbury [MD] Advertiser*, May 4, 1912, p. 4). Winning was a dominant issue in the advertising messages in all the primaries studied in the 1912-1992 period, and was often mentioned in candidate attacks upon one another.

The image of *the fighter* is an integral part of the conflict story. While all the primary candidates are generally "fighting" to obtain the nomination, and the candidates themselves routinely use this term in their speeches and advertisements ("Fighting Bob LaFollette," "Fighting Bob Taft"), the press identifies only certain people as fighters. The term is an admiring one. It is selectively applied to candidates fighting against the odds, either in the David and Goliath model, or in the Sisyphus model. Roosevelt in 1912, Kefauver in 1952, Wallace and McGovern in the early 1972 primaries, Humphrey in the 1972

California primary, and Buchanan in 1992 all fit the David and Goliath model. Clinton in 1992 was like Sisyphus, who fought to roll a heavy stone uphill, only to have it always roll down again. Other candidates fight against the odds, yet they do not receive this kind of attention. For example, Harold Stassen fought against the odds in the 1952 Republican primaries, and Governor Jerry Brown was a definite underdog in the 1992 Democratic primaries; both suffered long periods of press neglect. Why?

The press construction of the candidate as an admirable fighter seems to require one or more of these conditions:

a) that the press needs a fighter to make a good story, as in the case of Buchanan in 1992 (without Buchanan, Bush had no Republican opponents, *ergo* no story);

b) the press *likes* the candidate, as in the cases of Roosevelt, Kefauver, McGovern, Humphrey, Buchanan, and Clinton;

c) the press realizes that the candidate is such a giant figure in American politics that to ignore the story would be considered negligent, as in the case of Roosevelt in 1912 and Humphrey in 1972;

d) the press sees poll evidence that the candidate is gaining or losing rapidly in comparison to the other candidates (true in all these cases at the time of greatest press attention).

The focus on personal traits of the candidates is an innate characteristic of presidential primaries. From the start, primaries engendered an inherent conflict between parties and the power of personality or image. With multiple candidates of the same party, party alone was no longer an adequate way to differentiate the candidates. And both the press and the candidates needed to point out the differences, so that the voters could form a basis for their choice. In 1912 and 1932, candidates in their speeches and advertisements still used the party label as an image trait, arguing that they were the best Republican, the strongest Democrat. The party labels connoted issue positions and leadership traits strongly identified with heroic figures of the past. For example, in 1912, Republicans Taft and Roosevelt competed to associate themselves most directly with Abraham Lincoln. Roosevelt even visited Lincoln's home in Springfield, Illinois, sat in Lincoln's old pew in the First Presbyterian Church, and laid a wreath at Lincoln's tomb (*New York Tribune*, April 8, 1912). Taft boasted of receiving a supportive let-

ter from Lincoln's son Robert (*New York Tribune*, April 29, 1912). Candidates and their surrogates also stressed their image traits of competence and honesty, traits which transcend time in their significance in American politics.

By 1952, in addition to the consistent fighter image (Taft was "Fighting Bob Taft," Eisenhower was a war hero, Kefauver was the "crime fighter"), candidates stressed their competence and honesty, with much less attention to the party label. Taft, known nationally as "Mr. Republican," was the only one to offer his Republicanism as a persuasive image trait. In 1972 and 1992, party labels were rarely seen in the primaries (though Clinton called himself a "New Democrat" in 1992), and honesty and competence were contested issues.

Candidate Innovations Set the Media Agenda: Survival of the Quickest

"[Clinton's] own inclination . . . is always to be more aggressive, always to get out there, not sit and wait and react." Paul Begala, Clinton/Gore Campaign, 1992 (in Royer, 1994, p. 79)

Many modern works on political campaigns assume or argue for the presence of powerful media effects. Research by McCombs (1981), Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and others have shown convincingly that the media agenda directly influences both what we think about, and, through the framing of topics, what we think. Hallin (1992) and Kendall (1993, 1995, 1997) have reported on the way television news reduces the language of candidates to ever-shorter soundbites, replacing it with the language of journalists. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) demonstrate a clear connection between the media's presentation of political events and the growth of voter cynicism. Patterson (1993) warns of the growing power of the media as the organizers and agenda-setters of campaigns, in the present situation of weak political parties. Meyrowitz (1995) has shown that the national media have the power to ignore a candidate completely, making the candidate virtually invisible to the nation. Are the presidential candidates mere puppets of the media, then? What chance does an outsider candidate have of breaking into the news? What chance does any candidate have of gaining media attention for his or her main ideas?

The struggle between the candidates and the media for dominance has pervaded the primaries

through history. The findings of this study indicate that, far from being dominated by media portrayals, candidates in the primaries have repeatedly demonstrated skill in setting the media's agenda and reaching around and through the media to communicate with their intended audiences. This inventiveness has been a recurring pattern across the primaries studied. Such behavior might be called "survival of the quickest," with "quick" being defined as either "rapid and swift," or "prompt to understand and learn, acutely perceptive, as in a quick mind" (Webster's). The two main ways candidates have influenced the campaign is through (a) adoption of new technologies, and (b) adoption of rhetorical strategies showing a keen understanding of media rules.

a. Adoption of new technologies

Political figures tend to follow the lead of the business world in their adoption of new technologies, trying to be more competitive by having a special new "weapon." Diffusion of innovation theory (Savage, 1981) suggests that the people most likely to try innovations are not the most comfortable and secure, but those aspiring to bring about change, who hope that using a new technique or product will help them to better their position. But in the presidential primaries studied, both candidates in strong and weak positions were at times responsible for early adoption of new technologies. In some cases, the choice made a conspicuous difference in the campaign.

In the 1912 primaries, Roosevelt and Taft used the telegraph to keep track of what their opponents were doing and to issue statements replying to each other's attacks. This technology allowed them to act much more quickly than had been possible before. In primary campaigns in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Maryland, Roosevelt and Taft followed each other from city to city, each keeping in touch by telegraph with the other's speeches in order to make an immediate response to the latest questions and charges. Roosevelt and Taft were such giants in the politics of the day that they automatically commanded media attention. The telegraph, however, added speed and immediacy to their ongoing campaign debate.

In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt—who later won the nomination and election—conducted an early direct mail campaign with party members, using the new technology of the addressograph. His campaign manager, James Farley, toured the country meeting party leaders and obtaining

their names and addresses as well as those of potential delegates. The addressograph allowed him to send wave after wave of mailings to these Democrats, informing them of Roosevelt's accomplishments in New York, asking their sense of Roosevelt's chances in their home areas, and in many ways involving them personally in the Roosevelt campaign six months before the primaries (Farley, 1938).

In 1952 the main use of new technology was by the Eisenhower campaign, the first to use television in the primaries. There is evidence that Eisenhower used at least two television ads and two paid televised speeches by surrogate speakers during the campaign, and probably many more (University of Oklahoma Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive; Adams, *New York Times*, March 7, 1952). Sigurd Larmon, head of the Young and Rubicam ad agency in New York, had joined the Eisenhower campaign in December 1951, and "worked without cease to help the state Ike organizations with billboards, newspaper ads, radio and television time" (Lodge, 1973, p. 87). George Gallup, reviewing the polling information about the 1952 New Jersey primary, reported that the Eisenhower margin had increased markedly "when [radio] spot and television programs were put to work." He called these "superb" efforts, in contrast to those of "the old-line politicians," most of whom "haven't even discovered that there is such a thing as radio and television" (Gallup letter, April 17, 1952, Eisenhower Library).

McGovern's use of the newly-emerging, direct mail technology in the pre-primary and primary period of 1972 gave him a steady source of funding and allowed him to build mailing lists in the key primary states. Tying his campaign to the antiwar movement and making full use of mailing lists, he was able to fund his campaign through direct mail, to spread his message to new audiences, and to reinforce his followers before the days of campaign finance reform and matching funds (Hart, 1973; McGovern, 1977; George McGovern Papers, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton).

In 1992, the most innovative use of new technologies in the primaries was by former Governor Jerry Brown of California, who at first was given little attention by traditional news media. As early as September 1991, Brown was conducting interviews on talk radio, and soon having interviews via satellite on cable television, running a half-hour infomercial shown on cable stations, and using a 1-800 telephone num-

ber. Because of these innovations, he was able to keep his campaign going for many months without the extensive funds of his opponents. For example, he spent far less on television advertising in the New Hampshire primary than any of his opponents, only \$60,000, while the other Democrats spent between \$430,000 and \$950,000 (Devlin, 1994).

In the cases of Roosevelt and Eisenhower, the use of new technologies enabled them to reach specific audiences who were important to their nomination; in the cases of McGovern and Brown, the new technologies helped them to raise money and stay in the race despite initial low standings in the polls and lack of funds.

b. Adoption of strategies showing a keen understanding of media rules

In addition to their adoption of innovative technologies, some primary candidates have also shown a genius for influencing media coverage through mastery of media rules. They use strategies which appeal to the media's craving for novelty, surprise, conflict, drama, and the story of the fighter against the odds. Both outsiders who are being ignored by the media and those already considered major candidates have displayed this ability, though for outsiders the need to command media attention can verge on the desperate.

In 1912, for example, the challenger, Theodore Roosevelt, already commanded major press attention as a force in American politics. His problem was not to get on the media agenda, but to get favorable coverage as the newspapers were overwhelmingly supporting the incumbent, President Taft. By forcefully advocating the idea of the primary as a glorious reform, Roosevelt tied his fortunes to a popular idea rooted in American values. He entered all the primaries and touted their democratic qualities, saying, "There never was a straighter fight waged for the principle of popular rule than that which we are now waging. We are fighting against entrenched privilege, both political privilege and financial privilege" (Roosevelt to Senator Dixon, March 8, 1912, *Letters*, p. 523). This linkage not only made him central to the primary news stories, but it also enhanced the public significance of the primaries themselves. The fact that he treated them so seriously legitimized the news story.

In 1952, Kefauver not only earned votes in New Hampshire by his unusual door-to-door, personal campaign,¹⁰ but when he won the New Hampshire Democratic primary over President Truman in a great upset, his novel method of

campaigning drew increased press attention. They portrayed him as a fighter against the odds.

In 1972, President Nixon worked assiduously to gain favorable press attention. Though he had no serious opposition in his own party, at several points he virtually entered the Democratic primaries, timing his own actions to compete with the Democrats on the media agenda. The most successful of these strategies involved the timing of his trips to China and the Soviet Union. Knowing that these historic first trips would command heavy press attention, and that he had a good chance of earning praise as a bold, skillful leader, he planned them to coincide with the immediate pre-primary period in the important Democratic primary states, New Hampshire and California. The strategy worked well, stealing the lead stories from the Democratic primary contenders battling for position and casting Nixon in the role of statesman.

Of all the primary candidates in 1992, Governor Bill Clinton displayed the best understanding of how to secure favorable media attention, and how to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. A clear lesson on the need for a quick response came from the 1988 presidential campaign, in which Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis failed to respond to President Bush's attacks, thereby losing ground in the polls. By contrast, Clinton's strategies depended heavily upon his use of language, particularly through his broadening of the number of opportunities for audiences to be exposed to his words. His campaign was a veritable onslaught of words, offensively and defensively. The first innovative strategy he employed was to give three major addresses at his alma mater, Georgetown University, in November and December 1991. Though the speeches did not receive much coverage, they introduced him to many reporters and party leaders as a serious, substantive figure. This was an unusual campaign decision—to give a cluster of related, set-piece, policy position speeches so early, not on the campaign trail, but at a prestigious university in Washington—and it showed an astute awareness of the need to win over an elite audience of party and press leaders.

Clinton established a pattern of communicative behavior in New Hampshire that he was to follow in subsequent primaries: when the attacks on him were strong, he fought back by escalating the number of speech-related events. Thus, when his standing in the polls was dropping in New Hampshire, he scheduled a rally every night, brought over one hundred Arkansas

friends to the state to meet and talk with voters, bought two half-hour television segments for town hall meetings with call-in questions, and distributed twenty thousand videotapes to Independent voters. When Clinton and his wife appeared on "60 Minutes" immediately after the Super Bowl in late January to discuss the charges of his infidelity, they commanded an audience which *Time* estimated would approximate 100 million, a larger audience than President Bush could expect two nights later when he gave his important State of the Union address (Kramer, February 3, 1992). The campaign's research during this embattled period showed that "the public responded positively to Clinton's lack of defensiveness" (Greenberg, 1997, personal correspondence).

In February, 1992, when the story of Clinton's 1969 letter on the draft first broke, the Clinton campaign made a deliberate choice "to communicate a self-confident state of mind on the draft letter," to show that they "were proud of the letter—not afraid, not on the defensive" (Greenberg, 1997, personal correspondence). They believed that when people read the whole letter in context, rather than hearing about it in short excerpts, they would make a more positive interpretation. Before the media had a chance to begin dissecting the letter, the campaign paid for the publication of the entire 1200-word letter in New Hampshire newspapers. In negotiations with Ted Koppel for an interview of Clinton on "Nightline," they also indicated that they "wanted the whole letter presented" (Greenberg, 1997, personal correspondence), and Koppel agreed to do so, reading the whole letter aloud and scrolling it down the screen. The media focussed so heavily on Clinton's campaign during this period that other primary candidates complained that they couldn't even get on the news (Royer, 1993). This unorthodox mix of lengthy paid advertising and news coverage in the midst of charges of scandal resulted in a blurring together of advertising and news in which voters were presented with Clinton's own construction of the script. Both the degree of candidate control over the language and the quantity of the language were unusual.

In each of the cases cited, candidates showed their understanding of what attracts media attention and ways to reach their intended audience through innovative technologies and shrewd communicative strategies. Their means were rhetorical means; they demonstrated their skill in employing "the available means of persuasion" for the given situation (Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*).

The consistent appearance of candidates with such abilities argues that in the primaries at least, the strong candidate model deserves as much attention as the strong media model.

Part II: 1996 and Beyond

To what extent did the communication patterns of the candidates and media in the past foretell those of 1996? The 1996 primaries bore close resemblance to those of earlier years, in that (1) they were treated as important by candidates and media, (2) the media covered them as a dramatic conflict and focussed upon the personal traits of the candidates, and (3) several candidates showed remarkable inventiveness in shaping the media agenda and reaching the voters. One unique development in state laws clearly modified the communication patterns in the 1996 primaries: the frontloading of the primary schedule. Two other developments also deserve mention—the evolution of computer technology and the growing role of talk radio—although they affected a limited number of voters.

More Republicans entered the Republican primaries in 1996 than in any previous year: a total of 11 announced in 1995, dropping to 9 by 1996. Republican turn-out was at an all-time high, especially in the early primaries, with almost 14 million people voting in 40 states and the District of Columbia (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, August 3, 1996, p. 63). On the Democratic side, President Clinton as the incumbent started with a natural advantage in securing renomination. He also managed to discourage any possible opposition by raising a war chest of \$26.8 million by the end of 1995, as well as having \$11 million in campaign matching funds (Mayer, in Pomper, 1997). Though he ran unopposed, his name appeared on the ballot in 32 states and the District of Columbia, he campaigned in many of those states, and over 10 million Democrats voted in the primaries (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, August 17, 1996, p. 79).

The media in 1996 also gave the primaries much attention. Although the proportion of people who said they watched television news declined from 74% in 1994 to 59% in 1996 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1996), television still remained the predominant news source and will be the main emphasis here. Coverage of the primaries on network evening newscasts was actually 20% higher than in 1992 during the January 1–March 26 primary period, even though there was no contest in the

Democratic primary (*Media Monitor*, March, 1996). In the January 24–March 13, 1996 period, 30% of the lead stories on network television focussed on the primaries, far more than on any other topic in that period.¹¹

Some state legislatures acted to move their 1996 primary and caucus dates earlier. Louisiana chose to hold its caucuses on February 6, before Iowa; Delaware chose to hold its primary February 24, only four days after New Hampshire; New York moved its primary from April to March 7, five days before Super Tuesday; and California moved up its primary by more than two months, to March 26, “aiming to give the state a more decisive role in Presidential campaigns” (“Bill for Earlier Primary,” Sept. 10, 1993). This frontloading resulted in the greatest compression of the primary schedule to date, and forced candidates to announce their candidacies earlier, raise money earlier, and use pre-primary contests to prove their viability and attract media attention. Governor Lamar Alexander remarked that “the combination of federal limits on fund raising and the bunching of primaries . . . pushed the real presidential race backwards into 1995”; he reported that he had attended 250 fund-raisers in 1995 (Alexander, *Media Studies Journal*, 1997, p. 33).

The media coverage of the 1996 primaries reflected this change. As in previous years, the early Iowa caucuses (Feb. 12) and New Hampshire primary (Feb. 20) received the greatest coverage, with the three television networks devoting 92 stories to Iowa and 98 stories to New Hampshire on their evening news in the January 1–March 26, 1996 period (*Media Monitor*, March 1996, p. 2). But Pat Buchanan’s earlier wins in the Alaska “straw poll” caucus against Steve Forbes on January 30, and the Louisiana caucuses of February 6 against Phil Gramm were also treated as significant milestones. Buchanan rose rapidly in the polls, closing in on Dole and Forbes. By February 11, long-time NBC anchor Tom Brokaw remarked: “There’s a media frenzy in Iowa this year the likes of which I have never seen in all the years that these caucuses have been going on (NBC, Feb. 11, 1996).

With Dole’s decisive victory in the South Carolina primary on March 2, defeating Buchanan, Alexander, and Forbes, his opponents began to abandon ship. Gramm had withdrawn earlier, Senator Richard Lugar and Alexander dropped out March 6, and Forbes on March 14. On March 9, *only 18 days after the New Hampshire primary*, the networks began to

speak as though the primary contest was over. Media coverage dropped off precipitously from March on, true to the pattern found in primaries through history: no contest = no coverage. Primaries in some of the biggest and most important states—Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin—“scarcely merited mention in the evening news” (Ceaser and Busch, 1997, p. 60). When coverage in the whole January–July, 1996 period is considered, “the networks’ 1996 election coverage was down 43% compared with 1992 and down a whopping 51% compared with 1988” (Tyndall, Freedom Forum, 1996, p. 4).

Media treatment of the primaries as a dramatic conflict or horse race continued in 1996, with 47% of the network evening news stories in the January 1–March 26 period focussed on the horse race, “up almost 50% from Campaign ‘92.” Less than 30% of the coverage featured the policy debate, with the top stories being (1) taxes (especially the flat tax), (2) the economy, (3) jobs, (4) international trade, and (5) the Federal budget (*Media Monitor*, March 1996, p. 2).

The personal traits of candidates again drew heavy media attention. Candidate issues, such as “controversies over the campaign trail conduct of the candidates or their staffs,” received 29% of the network news coverage in the January 1–March 26, 1996 period (*Media Monitor*, March 1996, p. 2). As Goldman et. al. have pointed out, “the media tend . . . to see a campaign as a mirror of the candidate” (1994, p. 84). Thus, the media saw Dole’s “inability to generate enthusiasm, . . . lack of a clear ‘message,’ and disorder in his campaign organization” as serious problems which were causally related (Just, in Pomper, 1997, p. 94).

In contrast to their critical attention to Dole’s tactics, the media coverage of Clinton dwelt much more on his ethics, particularly with stories of the Whitewater hearings during the primaries (lead stories on early evening network television on January 25, 26, and 30, and February 5, 1996). But more than any other characterization, Clinton appeared in his official capacity as President, offsetting the Whitewater portrayal of a dishonest, unethical man with his image as a national leader: competent; compassionate; firm in standing up to Congress and Cuba; signer of important bills (Telecommunications Bill); taking the lead in cooling tensions between Taiwan and China; and working hard to counter international terrorism.

The tendency of candidates to use the term “fighter” was less conspicuous and central in 1996 than in past primaries—not the stuff of big

type or advertising themes. In glossy campaign pamphlets distributed in New Hampshire, for example, occasional references could be found to Dole, Buchanan, and Alexander as fighters for desired policies (“Bob Dole’s Agenda for New Hampshire’s Future,” “Pat Buchanan: Reclaiming The American Dream,” “Lamar Alexander for President”). A few television ads promoted a fighter image: Dole was “fighting for our conservative agenda” (C-SPAN tape), Buchanan was in “a fight for America” in Louisiana (Devlin tape), and Gramm “fought” against “big government-run health care” (Devlin tape). But the network news coverage identified one clear fighter: Pat Buchanan. In the January 24–March 13, 1996 period, candidates were labelled as fighters 17 times: Buchanan, 11; Dole, 3; Forbes, 2; Alexander, 1 (see footnote 11). The heavy coverage of the fighter against the odds had been characteristic of media depiction of both Clinton and Buchanan in 1992. Though national reporters do not tend to agree with Buchanan’s views, their 1996 portrayal of his tremendously energetic, defiant campaign and vivid fighting language was far from negative. Buchanan met the criterion for the “fighter” label because he had such dramatic changes in fortune, both winning and losing. But that was also true of Dole and Forbes. The journalists liked Buchanan—he was one of them.

In the 1996 primaries, both Forbes and Clinton, through unique rhetorical strategies, displayed remarkable inventiveness in shaping the media agenda and reaching the voters. Rather than beginning his campaign with the usual biographical ads, Forbes went immediately to ads which “emphasized a single issue position: replacing the graduated income tax with a 15 percent flat tax. With this issue alone he seized control of the discourse,” expanding the influence of his ads with January 1996 cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* (Just, in Pomper, 1997, p. 79). He “had almost unlimited resources [and] spent over \$40 million . . . in only about five months” (Reed, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 11). Other candidates found in their research that “Steve Forbes and flat tax were synonymous” (Reed, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 75), and a January 1996 *New York Times*/CBS poll reported that “58% of voters had heard or read about the flat tax, up from 34% the previous year” (Just, in Pomper, 1997, p. 79). While Forbes eventually lost momentum under a barrage of public criticism for trying to “buy the election,” and under attack by Dole for his “risky ideas” and “untested leadership” (Fabrizio, Institute of Politics,

1997, p. 75), his single-issue strategy took him farther than anyone had expected.

Clinton had been successful in getting his message across in the 1992 primaries, and he continued this pattern in 1996. His two highly effective rhetorical strategies were (1) running early and continuous issue advertising through the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and (2) shaping the State of the Union Address to highlight his major campaign themes. The two strategies shared the same goals (devised for all his messages by his advertising firm, advisers, and himself). The campaign set out to “infuse everything the president did with a sense of optimism,” to “talk about values as opposed to programs,” and to “talk in terms of unity, not class,” as well as to emphasize the good economy (Knapp, in Devlin, 1997, p. 1059). The President would “act Presidential,” modelling his approach on that of President Reagan in 1984 (Scott, July 14, 1996).

The DNC advertising, which is still under attack by the Republican Party (Black, 1997) and by the organization Common Cause—for violating campaign spending laws—ran from late June 1995 until the Democratic convention, August 1996. Democrats defended the ads as “issue advocacy ads in support of a legislative agenda of the President and the Congress” (Knight, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 119). Of the 40 ads produced by the DNC, Devlin reports that about 10 ran in the preprimary period, 20 in the primary period, and 10 more after the primaries (Devlin, 1997). As Richard Morris, a major Clinton adviser, reported, “Week after week, month after month, from early July 1995 more or less continually . . . we bombarded the public with ads,” running them in the key swing states, and seeing Clinton go up in the polls where the ads ran (Morris, 1997, pp. 138-39). Clinton, in videotaped remarks to donors on December 7, 1995, told of the effects of these ads: “I cannot overstate to you the impact that these paid ads have had in the areas where they run . . . we are basically doing 10 to 15 points better than in the areas where we are not showing them” (Common Cause news release, Oct. 28, 1997).

The DNC ads were mainly comparative, attacking Republican policy and praising President Clinton’s policies on issues such as assault weapons, Medicare, and the “Gingrich-Dole Budget Plan.” In one ad, for example, the Republicans were accused of wanting “double premiums and deductibles,” “no coverage under [age] 67”, and \$270 billion in cuts on Medicare, while the President (shown seated at a desk)

wanted to “cut waste, control costs, save Medicare, balance the budget.” In one strong ad warning of Republican designs on Medicare, Dole and Gingrich were each shown speaking out firmly against Medicare, a convincing use of their own words as evidence against them. In at least two of the DNC ads aired, Dole and Gingrich were shown together in a black and white visual in which “Dole appeared to slide from left to right behind Gingrich as a kind of *eminence grise*, while the voiceover accused the pair of threatening Medicare” (Just, in Pomper, 1997, p. 83).

The Republicans, too, ran anti-Clinton and pro-Dole ads in the pre-primary and primary period. One anti-Clinton ad starting in November 1995 made him look foolish and indecisive, as he was shown in many different speeches saying that he would balance the budget . . . in “five years,” “seven years,” “nine years,” “ten years,” “eight years,” etc. But this was one of only two party ads in the pre-primary period. Most of the RNC spending occurred when the real primary race had ended, in May and June, 1996, when Dole had run out of money. Sheila Burke, Senior Adviser in the Dole/Kemp ‘96 campaign, acknowledged that the Dole campaign had failed to realize the significance of the Democratic attacks on Medicare, and were not prepared to respond adequately (Institute of Politics, 1997).

Clinton’s handling of the State of the Union Address in 1996 was a second significant rhetorical decision in the campaign. The State of the Union Address is a speech the media covers heavily.¹² The Clinton campaign decided to use this speech and the Clinton acceptance speech at the convention “to bookend the issues” which they wanted to emphasize, laying out the campaign outline (Knight, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 16). The speech stressed Clinton’s accomplishments—emphasizing the good economic news, and moved to the middle politically, proclaiming that “The age of big government is over.” He introduced a series of proposals to help the American family: expanding family leave, the V-chip, Internet in the schools, college tuition tax breaks, portable health care, and school uniforms. The speech was upbeat in style and content. According to Clinton’s pollster, Mark Penn, the speech’s effects “began a repositioning in terms of what Democrats were saying about the economy and the President By the time we got into the spring, everybody was beginning to agree that the economy itself was moving in the right direction. And the President began to

get a lot of credit for that" (1997, Institute of Politics, p. 122).

There is no doubt that this speech was portrayed in the media as a resounding success. As Gwen Ifill said, "Bill Clinton was generally praised for his upbeat, polished address" (NBC, January 24, 1996). The success seemed all the greater because of the negative portrayal of Dole's "Republican Response to the President's State of the Union Address."

"Because of equal time laws, Pat Buchanan can no longer host *Crossfire*, and Bob Dole can no longer host *Tales from the Crypt*." (David Letterman)

Dole's Response to the State of the Union Address, criticized by Republican leaders and rival candidates as too "confrontational" (Gwen Ifill, NBC, January 24, 1996), and as "a shaky performance" (Phil Jones, CBS, February 12, 1996) was discussed often on the news in the next three weeks. According to Scott Reed, Campaign Manager of Dole/Kemp '96, the Dole campaign, feeling hard-pressed by Forbes and others in the primaries, had decided to design a speech "that was ideological in nature to play toward the primary and caucus voters, not to play generally" (Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 73). The contrast with the Clinton speech was sharp, both in the delivery and content. Dole spoke to the camera, in a silent room, whereas Clinton spoke to a demonstrative joint session of Congress. Dole's voice was somewhat flat and lacking in feeling, whereas Clinton's resonated with energy and confidence. Dole gave a clearly partisan address, attacking President Clinton by name and linking him with "our country's elites," "meddlesome government," and "a discredited *status quo*." In his harshest sentence, he charged: "It is as though our government and our institutions and our culture have been hijacked by liberals and are careening dangerously off course." The managers of the Forbes and Alexander campaigns reported that the State of the Union Address had an electric effect on their campaigns. With Forbes, "It was almost like Dole collapsed with the State of the Union. Then all of a sudden, we filled the vacuum" (McLaughlin, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 78). With Alexander, "We started the 'Alexander beats Clinton' [message] at that point. It was largely focused around one single thing—Clinton's extraordinary State of the Union address and the weak Dole performance" (Griffith, Institute of Politics, 1997, p. 76). Gramm said after the speech, "it was clear to

anybody who watched . . . that Bob Dole cannot and will not beat Bill Clinton" ("Rivals Pile On," January 25, 1996, *The Hotline*).

One of the obvious changes in campaigning in the modern era is the compression of the news cycle. As James Carville remarked, "Now, thirty seconds after the event, it goes on over CNN News. There's no time to reflect" (Carville, 1997, "Forum"). In an attempt to deal with this pressure to get and distribute information *fast*, candidates have used new computer technologies. In 1992, the Clinton general election campaign had made use of e-mail, and the expectation was that the Internet would be a major factor in the 1996 primaries. By the end of 1995, all major presidential candidates had web sites (Freedom Forum, April 1996). But there is little evidence that these pages had any particular impact on the primaries. A Media Studies Center/Roper survey in early 1996 "found that less than 5% of the public has ever visited a governmental or politically oriented World Wide Web site, and, of these, most are 'news junkies' who . . . are high consumers of several news media" (Swanson, 1997, pp. 1276-77).

Although the new computer technologies did not have much direct influence on voters, they helped to speed up the exchange of information within the press corps and the campaign staffs, where modem-equipped laptop computers were much in evidence, and subscription newlines for journalists enabled them to get fast-breaking news. Clearinghouse sites, such as Campaign '96 Online, AllPolitics, B/CS Presidential Campaign Tour & Opinion Page, NetVote, PoliticsUSA, ElectionLine, and Vote Smart Web helped people find information fast (Freedom Forum, April 1996).

Talk radio, another new trend away from the traditional media, continued to grow, more than tripling in number of programs from the late 1980s (Herbst, 1995; Jones, 1994). Rush Limbaugh alone had 20 million listeners on 650 stations (St. George, 1994). In the pre-primary and primary period in 1996, large numbers of conservative Republicans participated actively in talk radio, discussing the Republican primary candidates, with a particular focus on arguments about Pat Buchanan (D. Jones, 1997). Pfau, et. al. (1998) found that among registered Republicans who used political talk radio just before the primaries began, this medium influenced their perception of candidates more than any other communication source.

Expectations for 2000

The primaries of 2000 are likely to look much like those of 1996. The number of candidates running will be higher, as there will be contests in both parties. Although Vice President Al Gore will undoubtedly have the advantage in terms of money—operating from a position of strength with eight years of vice presidential experience and support from President Clinton—other Democrats are already expressing interest and getting attention from the “great mentioners” in the press: former Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey, Senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, Representative Dick Gephardt of Missouri, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, and Governor Howard Dean of Vermont. So many Republican names are emerging that there are likely to be even more contenders in 2000 than the eleven who entered the race in 1995. Several of the top-ranking candidates in 1996 are likely to run again: Lamar Alexander, Steve Forbes, and Pat Buchanan. Other Republicans being mentioned are: former Vice President Dan Quayle, Speaker Newt Gingrich, Senator John McCain of Arizona, Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee, Texas Governor George W. Bush, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, and Michigan Governor John Engler.

After observing the effects of frontloading in 1996, the Republican National Convention established a task force to change party rules to prevent such extreme crowding of the early primary schedule. A system of incentives was adopted giving states bonus convention delegates if they hold their primaries later (Republican National Committee, *Rules*, 1996). The purpose is to elongate the primary period and give candidates a chance to become known to the voters. The new rules seem clearly to be a backlash against the kind of Pat Buchanan grass-roots-style candidacy that caught fire early in 1996 and so worried the Republican party leaders. After the Fall 1998 elections, the individual state legislatures will consider whether they want to change their laws according to these recommendations. Based on the results of the 1996 primaries, it seems doubtful that many states will choose later primary dates, even with the offer of bonus delegates. Why have a primary late, after most of the candidates have dropped out and the media make little mention of the event? The schedule is likely to be more compressed than ever in 1996.

California's 2000 primary may be dramatically changed by the passage of a proposition in March

1996 requiring that “all candidates appear on the same primary ballot, regardless of party.” Supporters describe it as a way to increase competition among candidates, choice for the voter, and voter turnout, while opponents fear it will be “a defeat for California's political parties.” This open primary law was upheld by a Federal judge in November 1997, but faces further court challenges (“California Judge Backs Open Primary Election,” *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 1997).

Several lessons learned from the 1996 primaries will undoubtedly affect the 2000 primaries. (1) Based on the success of the early and continuous advertising by the Democratic National Committee, both parties will use such advertising, starting as early as 1998. (2) Based on the early success of Forbes' issue advertising, the 2000 candidates may imitate this unusual approach, starting with clearly focussed issue advertising rather than the typical biographical ads. (3) Based on the hard experience of the failed Republican campaigns of 1992 and 1996—when the party nominees were generally considered to be poor public communicators—the Republicans are more likely to nominate someone who is comfortable and effective in enunciating a clear and focussed message and vision.

There is potential for the Internet to play a greater role in the 2000 primaries, especially if the number of computer users continues to grow, and if computers and televisions converge so that television sets are Internet carriers. With this combined technology, Diamond and Silverman (1997) envision a time when candidates can have video chats with voters, and viewers can select convenient tune-in schedules for their Internet news, with “hyperlinks to voting records, issue statements, party platform planks,” as well as video data (pp. 166-67). The most practical use of the Internet may be as a place to organize groups of like-minded people to discuss political issues and causes (Bentivegna, 1997), similar to the role of talk radio. But the repeated findings that the same people who pay attention to news on traditional media are using the Internet for political news suggests that the Internet mainly serves the news-rich, and has yet to become a broadly appealing medium for political news.

Finally, unless there is major campaign finance reform, more politically inexperienced multi-millionaires are likely to run in 2000, refusing matching funds so they can advertise without limit, and gaining a place on the media agenda. In 1992 there was one such candidate—

H. Ross Perot. In 1996 there were three such candidates: Steve Forbes, Morry Taylor, and H. Ross Perot. Who will follow in their footsteps?

Principles for Change: Communication in the Primaries

In an ideal world of presidential primaries, (1) voters would learn enough about the primary candidates to feel that they could make a well-informed choice, (2) the candidates would be able to communicate with the voters, and (3) the media would assist both voters and candidates in this process, providing plentiful, timely, and accurate information and expert analysis. Most parties could easily subscribe to these goals. Taken altogether, the media do meet these goals. Anyone making careful use of multiple news sources (such as good newspapers, C-SPAN, CNN, PBS, National Public Radio, major news-magazines, network news broadcasts and interview shows, and local television) will know all they need to know to make a wise choice. Candidates supplement the news with paid advertising that contains information about themselves and their positions.

But there are big obstacles on the road to utopia. Busy voters catch their news when and where they can, responding best to subject matter which "is made interesting and relevant to them" (Graber, 1993; Fiske and Kinder, 1981). News media with tight time and space limits often reduce the candidates' messages to short soundbites or brief phrases, and candidates lack money to advertise enough to keep their message salient.

The solutions clearly must involve all three parties: voters who are more active in seeking information they need, media that makes information more accessible and interesting, and candidates that are able to reach the voters with the basic substance of their messages regardless of money. From what we know about voter political interest and involvement, it is highest in forums such as presidential debates and talk radio, and in situations such as close elections, scandals, and stories of personal lives. It peaks as Election Day draws near. One of the most successful campaign events of recent times was the presidential debates of 1992: four nationally televised debates in eight days, "like a television miniseries in order to build viewership" (Owen, 1995, p. 145). They were widely publicized, held in the last

month before Election Day in a closely-contested election, full of argument about policy and information about the individual personalities, and drawing an ever-larger audience. In exit polls, voters said the debates were most influential in helping them to make their voting decisions.

My suggestions for change would try to capitalize on our knowledge of such successful political events. In the 2000 primaries, there should be several widely advertised and nationally televised candidate events early in the primary season, when the campaign is most contested. As with the fall debates, these events should be advertised as a package to attract maximum attention, and scheduled to take advantage of the natural interest in certain key contests. These events might be debates or symposiums on important controversial issues such as health care, or the environment, and/or "Meet the Press" type interviews with individual candidates, perhaps presented back-to-back so that voters could make comparisons. The goals would be to attract and hold public interest, provide information valuable for voting decisions, and to help the candidates get their messages to the voters, for free.

As network news remains the most popular source of political information, the networks and cable news networks could also contribute to the achievement of the goals by increasing the instances of excellent political news coverage that I saw in watching nightly news during the 1996 primaries. There were many good moments, but the following stood out for me. Lisa Myers of NBC travelled with Senator Dole, and the resulting long story provided much information on Dole's interests and personality in a lively, human style (NBC, March 12, 1996). In addition, Jeff Greenfield's (ABC) long commentary on primary reform gave an astute analysis of the primary reforms from 1968 to the present, showing both the serious and absurd sides of history (ABC, March 10, 1996). CNN's "Prime Time" coverage of the South Carolina primary debate gave the audience a chance to follow what all the candidates said about international trade and was remarkable both for letting the candidates speak for themselves, and for focussing on one issue. Though concise, it enabled the viewer to make a comparison (CNN, February 29, 1996). Erik Engberg's "Reality Check" of February 19 on CBS raised questions about whether the people of New Hampshire were up to their task as "king-

makers” of the candidates. It was a stinging report on the state’s shortcomings, certainly eye-opening and informative (though New Hampshire fans would surely ask for rebuttal time). More coverage of this sort would serve the voters and candidates well.

Whatever changes are adopted, they need to take into consideration that some patterns appear to be innate in presidential primaries and their news coverage. Primaries help to shape the agenda for the rest of the election year, naturally lead to a focus on the personal traits of the candidates, provide irresistible dramatic conflict and negative clashes for news stories, and finally reward candidates who can best communicate with their audiences: the media, the party leaders, and the voters.

Endnotes

This essay was written while I was a Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The subject is the focus of my forthcoming book on *Communication in the Presidential Primaries*. The research has been supported by a sabbatical leave from the University at Albany, State University of New York, and a Goldsmith Award from the Shorenstein Center.

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1. Aldrich (1980) states that the 1960 Democratic race, in which Senator John F. Kennedy demonstrated to the party bosses that he could win in primaries against Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, “was the first nomination in which primary victories were undeniably the keystone of success” (p. 10). Even so, 1960 is still seen as a year of strong party domination of the nomination process.
2. Kefauver, winner of 12 of the 15 preference primaries, led in the polls just before the 1952 Democratic convention: Kefauver 45%, Alben Barkley 18%, Adlai Stevenson 12%, Richard Russell 10%, Averill Harriman 5%. The Democrats, however, chose Stevenson as their nominee (Busch, 1997, p. 133).
3. Davis (1980) reports that 13 states held primaries in 1912. Contemporary newspaper accounts, however, mention eight others.
4. President Hoover ignored the primaries. He did have one consistent opponent, an ex-Senator from Maryland, Joseph I. France. According to Bain (1960), “France entered most of the preferential primaries that were held in 1932, and appeared to score impressive victories in many of them.” But since he was usually the only one running, it was hard to gauge their meaning. Only in Oregon was the vote binding on the delegates; elsewhere he didn’t get pledged support (p. 234). Even when he and Hoover appeared on the same ballot, in Maryland, the Maryland press in the week before the primary totally ignored the contest. It might be more accurate to say that there was no contest.
5. Truman finally decided not to run for re-election, on March 29, 1952.
6. The next most frequently aired lead story dealt with the Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King verdict, with 11% of the leads in this period.
7. Another version of the no contest-no coverage primary would be a favorite son situation, such as Governor Bill Clinton in the 1992 Arkansas Democratic primary.
8. Susan Herbst (1993), in *Numbered Voices*, has discussed this phenomenon of the use of numbers to weigh public opinion.
9. Mitchell S. McKinney and his graduate seminar in political communication at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, were most helpful in providing insights on this topic.
10. Harold Stassen’s 1948 primary campaign had actually led the way in this interpersonal campaign style. Stassen ran in New Hampshire “as if for sheriff, shaking hands and kissing babies.” He had also pioneered in building a large volunteer organization, a “campaign structure . . . to create a blaze of grass-roots support—with the hope that the resulting heat would warm party leaders to Stassen” (Kirby, 1996, pp. 155, 159).
11. The author examined one news broadcast each evening in the January 24–March 13, 1996 period, from early evening television coverage by ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN (Prime News), varying the order every four nights. Of 50 broadcasts studied, there were 15 lead stories on the primaries (30% of the total). The next most frequently mentioned were four lead stories each on: Whitewater and the Clintons, winter weather in the United States, and the shooting down of unarmed American civilian planes by Cuba.
12. Kendall (1993) found that the State of the Union Address was the only speech given lead stories by the evening network news programs in the 1992 presidential primary period.

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Media Sources

This essay is part of a larger study of communication in the presidential primaries, to be published in book form. The author has examined newspaper archives, radio scripts and schedules, political commercial archives, newsreels, and early evening network and CNN Prime News, in collections at the Library of Congress, the National Archives, Princeton University, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, and the University of Oklahoma Political Commercial Archive, as well as many other sources.

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