THE MESSAGE MATTERS
Campaign Effects in Presidential Elections

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In 1976, Jimmy Carter ran for President of the United States as a trustworthy Washington outsider. He was elected by defeating an opponent who was the consummate Washington insider – a man who pardoned Richard Nixon and who was appointed to the Vice Presidency and the Presidency. Gerald Ford was as inside the Washington beltway as one could get – and he could not get out. Similarly, John F. Kennedy in 1960 recognized his opponent’s culpability in what was called “The Missile Gap” – the alleged fact that America had fallen behind Russia in weapons development. Richard Nixon, whose administration had presided over this “slump” in American productivity, had no evidence it did not exist and could not counter Kennedy’s claim. Thus, he too, was stuck – although the economy was doing well and the war in Vietnam had not yet escalated.

What Carter and Kennedy both recognized and exploited was a dimension of electoral politics on which their opponents faced constraints. Although Ford and Nixon were members of incumbent administrations and the nation’s economy was growing over the course of their stewardships, their challengers defeated them. This book is about how candidates campaign, what effects these campaigns have on voters, and how the context of elections conditions all of these things in important ways.
What we know about why presidential candidates lose elections mostly centers around campaign strategies or candidate style. Pundits are quick to blame electoral losses on a poor campaign strategy or a candidate’s inability to connect with voters on the stump. Journalists, however, are rarely heard suggesting that a candidate lost because his or her policies were unpopular. Why did Michael Dukakis lose the 1988 presidential election after a 17-point lead coming out of his convention? It must be because George Bush out-campaigned him, say the experts. *The New York Times*

Editorial Board wrote:

> He [Dukakis] was not destined to lose at all, and did so only because he ran a dismal campaign. . . ‘Why didn’t he say …’ became a virtual motto of endless exasperation – when the Dukakis campaign gave leaden answers or no answers at all to accusations about the Pledge of Allegiance or prison furloughs or to questions like, ‘How would Governor Dukakis feel if his wife were raped and murdered?’

(November 9, 1988, p. A34)

Similarly, why did Bill Clinton win the 1992 election at a time when the incumbent Bush was popular and the economy was recovering from a recession? Many pundits answered that it was Clinton’s “War Room” campaign strategists who out-maneuvered the Bush campaign on a daily basis, or that Bush himself was somehow a “bad” campaigner:

> Something odd happens to Mr. Bush when he vaults into ‘campaign mode.’ His good manners fall away and he stands revealed as Nasty-man. . . this time it went from Red-baiting to juvenile expostulations like, ‘My dog Millie knows more about foreign affairs than these two bozos.’


What exactly is a good campaign or a good campaigner? These concepts have certain ephemeral qualities about them. Experts cannot precisely detail what makes a campaign “good”, except maybe that it produced a winner; and, they know a good campaigner when they see one. Such explication is not helpful. Most notably it ignores the fact that one
candidate can be a good campaigner in one year (Bush in 1988) and a lousy one in a later year (Bush in 1992). If campaign success were merely a function of the candidate’s ability to strategize about how to beat the opponent and then execute that strategy effectively, we would not expect to see such differences in the successes of candidates like Bush (1988,1992), Carter (1976,1980), and Nixon (1960,1968,1972).

There must be more to the story about why campaigns are successful than strategy and execution. My aim in this book is to explore more systematically the types of campaigns run by candidates for president of the United States by paying special attention to the constraints candidate’s face when running their campaigns.

The most important constraint for all candidates is the condition of the nation’s economy. Other constraints include previously taken issue positions or personal characteristics. I focus on illustrating why candidates like Carter and Kennedy exploit their opponents’ weaknesses, while Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower talk mainly about a booming economy, largely ignoring their opponent’s presence in the race – and why these campaign strategies are predictable well in advance of the election and ultimately successful. My hope is that presidential campaigns may come to be viewed not as exercises in strategy executed by idiosyncratic candidates whose personal capabilities and whims influence success, but as logical, rational and often pre-determined means toward an end.

**Basic Questions**

Much attention has been given recently to presidential campaigns because they are “too negative” or “too long” or cost “too much” money. Proposed reforms include removing or lessening the role of money, giving candidates free television advertising time, urging newspapers to report when candidates are lying or misleading voters in their advertisements, and asking candidates to sign “codes of conduct” or compacts to promise “good behavior”. These complaints and reforms presuppose that money, ads,
newspaper coverage, and campaign tone all matter to voters on Election Day. Or more generally, that what goes on during campaigns for the Presidency matters to voters at all. The extent to which discussion about these reforms increases in the absence of scholarly understanding about whether and how campaigns “matter” to voters is striking. While journalists, pundits, and voters may be confident that presidential campaigns influence election outcomes, political scientists have not always been so sure.

Party identification is still the greatest and most powerful predictor of vote choice across any demographic group (Miller 1994; Bartels 2000). Most people do not pay much attention to politics or campaigns, even when faced with making a decision about their president. And, worse yet, perhaps because of their lack of attention, it seems that many voters are uninformed about where the candidates for president stand on various and important issues. Some argue that since party identification is known, presumably, before the campaign starts, and voters do not attend to campaigns when they are happening, campaigns must not matter to voting outcomes.

The study of campaigns, however, is not that simple. What does it mean, for example, to say that a campaign “matters”? Does a campaign matter if it changes someone’s choices or vote decision? This is simple – probably so. However, does the campaign matter if it reinforces a voter’s decision – if it makes the voter more confident of his or her choice? What if campaigns change the focus of national discussion; do they matter then – even if a campaign does not produce a winning candidate or change people’s minds? If campaigns teach voters about the current state of the economy or of education policy or of trade policy in America, does it matter that voters have learned during the campaign even if their voting decisions were left unaffected? Any sophisticated and systematic analysis of campaigns and their effects must deal with these questions before moving on to assess whether the process is in need of change.
Many have argued that investigating the effects of campaigns is so complex as to be nearly impossible. Campaigns, because of their dynamic, contemporaneous, competitive, and cumulative nature take place in a research environment that is difficult to control. My own view is slightly more optimistic. If political scientists can theorize about voting behavior then we can theorize about campaign behavior and effects. Moreover, starting from a theory about how and why campaigns can matter, we can observe patterns of behavior among candidates that add to our understanding of the dynamic, contemporaneous, competitive, and cumulative nature of the campaign environment. That is what I attempt to do in the pages that follow.

**WHAT’S COMING**

This book is divided into three parts. Part I sets the stage for the other two by introducing theories of voting behavior and extrapolating them into a theory of how and why campaigns can matter (Chapter 2). From this theory, a campaign typology is developed that introduces two types of campaigns, the clarifying campaign (in which candidates clarify their position on an already important issue – the economy) and the insurgent campaign (in which candidates attempt to reset the agenda from the economy and onto an issue on which their opponent has previously committed to a position less popular than their own). Each campaign type consists of unique behavior by candidates and unique effects on voters (Chapter 3). For example, in the clarifying campaign I expect candidates to talk mainly about the economy – simply taking credit for the good economic times or laying blame for the bad times. Voters, then, should be very certain of the candidate’s positions on economic issues by the end of the campaign as they learn about them throughout the process. In the insurgent campaign the candidate is expected to talk mainly about an insurgent issue (one on which his opponent is less popular then him). If the
insurgent candidate is successful, voters, over time, should begin to believe that this issue is more important to their voting decision.

In Chapter 3 I also explain how the theory suggests candidates sort themselves into these two categories. Of critical importance here is the state of the nation’s economy. The candidate who is predicted to win the election based on a simple economic forecast runs the clarifying campaign. This could be the incumbent in a good economy or the challenger in a bad economy. The predicted economic-loser runs the insurgent campaign. I use a simple economic forecast to predict what types of campaigns the theory suggests candidates will run over the period from 1952-2000.

Part II begins in Chapter 4 in which I detail the content of modern presidential campaigns by conducting an analysis of campaign advertisements, stump speeches, and campaign news coverage for every election since 1952. Despite traveling with the candidates every day during the campaign, the data reveal a great divide between what candidates say and do and what the media report about them. In Chapter 5 I explain candidate behavior in campaigns using the theory and typology as foundations. Using content analyses from *The New York Times*, candidate advertisements, and candidate stump speeches, I am able to compare what candidates actually talked about during their campaigns with what the theory predicts they should have talked about. The analytic power of the theory is tested as I discover that eventual winners are most often those candidates who behave as the theory and typology predict they should. Candidates who violate the typology’s prescriptions lose elections.

In Chapter 6, Part III, I turn the investigative light onto the behavior of voters in elections, searching for the unique effects associated with the clarifying and insurgent campaigns. Using public opinion data from 1976 to 2000 provided by The National Election Study, I assess whether candidates who conform to the typology’s prescriptions were able to influence voters in specific and meaningful ways. Finally, in Chapter 7 I engage larger theoretical questions about context and constraints. Can
incumbent presidents manipulate national context? Is there an insurgent issue for every insurgent candidate or are some candidates just lucky? And, finally, how do these findings fit with common notions about democracy and elections?

Much of the theorizing and analyses in the beginning and latter part of the book is based upon the use of statistical and mathematical models. As much as possible I have tried to present material in the main sections of the book in terms that citizens interested in politics can understand. The nuances of mathematics and modeling, along with detailed information on the data, models, and estimates from which my conclusions are drawn can be found in the book’s appendices.
Chapter Six
Content v. Context: Micro-Level Tests of the Theory

So far, I have described presidential campaign behavior as predictable long before the candidates are known or the first general election campaign dollar is spent. I have described a campaign environment in which the economy plays a starring role and both candidates react to it. I have shown that candidates seem to understand this world and generally behave as the typology predicts they should, or they lose elections. Presidential candidates, at least some of them, understand that national context matters and that decisions about where to center their campaigns have consequences. Some of them are better at it than others, and some of them are exemplary (Kennedy, Nixon, Carter, and George W. Bush). Candidate behavior in campaigns is predictable and systematic, across candidates, across elections, and across varying national contexts.

But what I have yet to demonstrate is that this candidate behavior matters to voters in systematic and important ways. I have shown that it matters to outcomes, in general – but are the individual level mechanisms implied by the spatial model in Chapter 2 real? Does the clarifying candidate have to talk about the economy more than his opponent for voters to connect him to the economic prosperity? Or is it enough for this candidate that he happens to be in this fortunate position? How difficult is it for insurgent candidates to increase the importance of issues in voters’ minds – hopefully issues on which they benefit among voters more than their opponent? Is it even possible for insurgent candidates to prime issues among the electorate? Even those insurgent candidates who chose unwisely should have some success making those issues more important.
among voters, but what does the evidence suggest? In order to understand why the theory explains candidate behavior so well, it is necessary to explore individual level data that can demonstrate how voters are affected by the different types of campaigns.

Before I introduce these data, I want to set some expectations. Any argument is only as good as the evidence on which it is based. Sometimes we lose sight of this. For a long time now, the divide between scholars of politics and practitioners of politics over whether and how much campaigns matter has grown. The people who work on campaigns for a living, the candidates, even the voters know that campaigns are important. Their evidence is anecdotal and personal, but real. And the people who analyze campaigns, study them, and look deeply for patterns of effects have decided campaigns matter only in minimal ways, and only at the margins. Their evidence is observational, limited in quantity, but also real. Both sets of evidence suffer from limitations, and I fear it is the limitations, not the evidence itself, that is motivating the arguments. Too often we hear anecdotal stories about a campaign strategist’s successes while tending not to hear about the failures. Similarly, we hear about the lack of change in voters’ attitudes or survey responses over the course of “the campaign” without hearing that the campaign is being defined as a few weeks before the actual election.

To make stronger arguments we need better evidence. In order for analysts to argue that campaigns are important to voters, we need evidence showing the initial perceptions and affinities voters have for candidates, and by initial, I mean in the early stages of the nominating process, before the nominees are announced. Further, we need these data for lots and lots of people in order to isolate what might be a small (in size) yet important effect on people’s decisions. Then, we ideally need many interviews with these same people over the course of the campaign and over many years of elections in order to track how opinions change leading up to vote choice. And, the interviews would be quite long so that we could ask people about
all the possible sources of impact on their political attitudes and behavior. The costs of such a study would be astronomical and as such, it is not surprising that no study like this has been done in America.

What has been done, and done quite well, is no less impressive in size, continuity and scope. Every presidential election year since 1952 (and most midterms, too), the American National Election Study (ANES) completes at least one thousand interviews with American citizens before and after each presidential election.¹ The project is currently funded mainly by the National Science Foundation, but had many grantors over the years.² The content of the study changes year to year, but a surprising number of items have been retained over time. These data are analysts’ only and best shot at uncovering a pattern of effects for presidential campaigns that span the last half-century. It is to these data that I append my data on the content of campaigns and news coverage in an effort to learn whether the things candidates say and do in campaigns affect voters in elections. Of course, these data are not perfectly suited for this task, and the limitations will significantly impact the conclusions I can draw about campaign effects, but they will allow me to clearly identify patterns in some cases and in others, to carefully suggest relationships at work. Because the nature of the argument I am making is temporal – and over a 55-year period of time – the ANES is the best source of political time-series data available.

**Campaign Effects: What do Voters Say about Candidates and Does Campaign Discourse Matter?**

Among other things, the ANES contains measures that reflect the way ordinary Americans talk about presidential candidates. In each election since 1952, the ANES has asked a nationally representative sample of survey respondents the following set of questions about each of the major party candidates:
Now I'd like to ask you about the good and bad points of the major candidates for President. Is there anything in particular about [insert candidate's name] that might make you want to vote for him? What is that? Anything else?

Is there anything in particular about [insert candidate's name] that might make you want to vote against him? What is that? Anything else?

Interviewers code up to five reasons for voting for and against each candidate for a total of up to 20 reasons for the two major party candidates. These open-ended questions have the distinct advantage of allowing respondents to convey whatever voting considerations they may hold. Closed ended questions, in contrast, restrict respondents to a set of predetermined considerations that the survey writers have identified in advance. The flexibility of the open-ended questions is especially important in tracing changes in the bases of presidential voting over time, since survey writers are likely to do a better job some years than others in anticipating the considerations that will be uppermost in Americans' minds.

The candidate likes/dislikes questions are coded by the ANES into hundreds of different substantive categories, which I recoded into the same groups as those that describe the candidate and news content of campaigns: the economy, domestic policy, foreign policy and defense, and traits or character. The combination of data on campaign driven content in advertisements and speeches, news coverage of campaigns, and voters’ evaluations of candidates makes this a unique and powerful dataset for testing whether the things that candidates talk about in their campaigns influence voters in elections. In other words, before I can argue that what clarifying candidates say about the economy matters to voters, I want to demonstrate that what candidates say during campaigns makes it into voters' thoughts about the candidates during the campaigns.

In order to test the fidelity of this relationship, I reduce these open-ended data to the proportions of comments in each issue area for each
candidate in any given year. If voters are affected by the campaign such that the more candidates talk about something, the more voters either believe that thing is important or learn more about the candidate’s position on that issue (the two modes of campaign influence derived from the spatial model of voting) then voters’ evaluations of the candidates ought to reflect the things candidates are raising in their campaigns. And to some degree, the comments ought to be responsive to changes in the composition of candidate’s campaigns – maybe not over the course of a single election, but historically we would expect that voters’ make fewer comments about defense spending in years when the candidates do not talk about defense spending than in years when this issue is discussed with great frequency. Even if voters are merely sampling off the “top of their heads” (Zaller 1992) we would expect there to be more considerations about defense spending available for random sampling when candidates or the media talk about defense spending a lot compared to a paucity of considerations about defense spending at the top of one’s head when candidates do not mention the issue much at all.

To show the relationship between what candidates and media talk about during campaigns and what voters say about the candidates, I present the figures below, grouped by the four issue areas under consideration. Each figure plots the percent of voters’ comments about an issue on the vertical axis and the percent of candidate or news discourse about that same issue on the horizontal axis. A 45 degree-line would represent perfect fidelity – if the points fall on (or near) the 45 degree-line, a one percent increase in candidate or news discourse on a topic is reflected in a one percent increase in voters’ comments on that topic. As I mentioned earlier, we might not expect this relationship to be perfectly reflective, but it serves as a benchmark from which we can evaluate the fidelity of these relationships.5

As is evident in Figure 6.1, that kind of high fidelity relationship rarely exists. In some cases, voters rarely talk about issues (the economy)
making it difficult for changes in candidate or news discourse to register effects. In other cases, voters talk a lot about the topic (traits), which also makes it difficult for candidate or news content to have an effect. Most of the relationships, however, are positive, with the exception of trait and character coverage in the news, which seems to negatively affect how much voters talk about these things. Other relationships seem flat, indicating no fidelity between candidate or news content and voters’ thoughts (the economy, domestic, and foreign policy and the news, for example). The conclusion for campaign-voter fidelity seems to be that voters are subtly responsive to changes in campaign content, but their comments do not necessarily reflect the overall composition of the campaign very well.
Each row of the figure represents a different issue and each column is a mode of campaign communication. There are several ways to evaluate the trends in Figure 6.1. One way is to examine the tightness of the fit of the data, in other words, how closely are the data points scattered about the regression line? It is clear that the economy is the issue for which the relationship between campaign discourse and voters’ thoughts is the tightest.
– regardless of whether the information comes from ads, speeches, or news. This suggests that the issue itself drives the relationship, not a specific method of campaign content delivery. Domestic policy, on the other hand, trends more parallel to the 45-degree line than the economy, but the data have a lot of dispersion around the regression line. This suggests that the general relationship moves in the right direction, but there is a lot variation in the relationship between domestic policy campaign content and voters’ evaluations of candidates on this topic. The relationship between ad, speech, and news content and voters’ evaluations is positive and significantly different from zero for advertising on the economy, foreign policy, and traits. Speech content is only significantly related to voters’ comments for domestic and foreign policy, and news content is not significantly related to voters’ thoughts on any of these issues.

Surprisingly, news coverage seems to have very little if any relationship to the kinds of things people can say about the candidates. As I described earlier, one explanation for this may be the media’s constant need to define stories in compelling and sensational ways. It is possible that news stories, while interesting and worth watching, do not provide voters with the kind of material they can recite when asked what kinds of things they like or dislike about the candidates other than turning the generalities of the news stories into comments about candidates’ traits, which voters seem more than willing to do regardless of whether the candidates or the media talk about character.

To further investigate the unique forces driving voters’ evaluations of candidates, I analyze the open-ended responses and ascertain whether ads, speeches, or news coverage is mainly affecting people’s thoughts about candidates. The regression coefficients in Table 6.1 describe how voters are influenced by a one percent increase in candidate discourse about the issues in each column. In these models, the ads, speeches, and news coverage compete along with incumbency status and the party of the candidate to have a unique effect on voters’ thoughts about the candidates.
As the shaded cells in the table indicate, of the candidate discourse items, advertising is the one that most often influences voters. Incumbency status also has a small effect, presumably because people know more about candidates who have been in office already and when an incumbent starts talking about an issue, voters do not need to pay careful attention to fill in the blanks about what they might be saying.

This may make it easier for people to mimic the composition of incumbents’ campaigns. As the earlier figures demonstrate, news coverage of campaigns does not seem to affect voters’ thoughts about the candidates on any of these issues.
Table 6.1: Do Ads, Speeches, or News Coverage Drive Voters’ Evaluations of Candidates?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Foreign Policy</th>
<th>Domestic Policy</th>
<th>Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>0.17 (.05)</td>
<td>0.16 (.07)</td>
<td>0.04 (.16)</td>
<td>0.55 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches</td>
<td>-0.08 (.05)</td>
<td>0.10 (.09)</td>
<td>0.44 (.20)</td>
<td>-0.04 (.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>0.03 (.08)</td>
<td>-0.04 (.09)</td>
<td>0.10 (.28)</td>
<td>-0.30 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>0.03 (.01)</td>
<td>0.05 (.02)</td>
<td>-0.02 (.04)</td>
<td>-0.06 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-0.00 (.00)</td>
<td>0.04 (.02)</td>
<td>0.06 (.05)</td>
<td>-0.00 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.01 (.01)</td>
<td>0.00 (.02)</td>
<td>-0.06 (.06)</td>
<td>0.42 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 25 cases for each column because Goldwater speeches were not available. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are clustered for campaign year. Campaign content is measured in percent of appeals in ads, speeches, or news coverage about each issue in the columns. The content analysis is done for each candidate in every year from 1952-2000. Voters’ comments are from the ANES open ended likes-dislikes questions. Shaded cells indicate relationships significantly different from zero at a .05 level of confidence.

To detail this relationship with a bit more nuance, I am going to focus solely on campaign advertising, since that is the method of campaign communication with the strongest relationship to voters’ evaluations. The theory of campaigns suggests that clarifying and insurgent candidates will be sending voters’ different kinds of signals during campaigns, thus I examine the relationship between economic content in advertising and voters’ comments separately for clarifying and insurgent candidates. If the individual-level mechanisms derived from the theory of campaigns exist,
voters will have more to say about the relationship between clarifying candidates and the nation’s economy as compared to the same relationship for insurgent candidates because clarifying candidates should talk about the economy more than anything else and more than their opponents. The analyses in chapter 4 confirmed that most clarifying candidates behave this way. The question now is whether this practice has specific micro-level effects on voters.

In Figure 6.2, I present graphs showing the fidelity between campaign rhetoric and voters’ comments, but this time, the data are broken out by campaign type – clarifying or insurgent. The top row contrasts clarifying candidates from insurgents and the bottom row separates clarifying candidates who actually talked about the economy from those clarifying candidates who did not talk about the economy. This latter comparison is an attempt to test whether it is enough for candidates merely to be in the incumbent party during a healthy period of economic growth, or whether these economically advantaged candidates actually also have to talk about the state of the nation’s economy in their campaigns. As with the analysis of the errors in basic forecasting models, these data show that talking about an economic advantage is helpful to candidates.
The simple linear relationship between economic content in campaign advertising content and in voters’ evaluations shows that the relationship is tightest for clarifying candidates. For every one percent increase in economic advertising, the composition of voters’ evaluations contains nearly two-tenths of a percent more economic content. Changes in clarifying candidates’ level of advertising on the economy explain nearly half the variation in economic content of voters’ comments. In contrast, the changes in voters’ evaluations of insurgent candidates is closer to a one-tenth of a percent increase for every one percent increase in advertising content about the economy. More telling, however, is the fact that only 22 percent of the variation in voters’ comments is explained by the changes in advertising content for insurgent candidates. People’s thoughts about the
nation’s economy and the candidates better reflect the composition and dynamics of the clarifying candidates’ campaigns, as the theory predicts.

To establish whether actually talking about the economy more than anything else in the campaign and more than your opponent pays off for candidates in terms of the kinds of things voters say about them, in the bottom row of Figure 6.2, I compare the clarifying candidates who follow the theory’s recommendations to those who do not. Talking about the economy in campaign advertising (and by definition being advantaged by economic conditions) results in twice as big an increase in voters’ responsiveness to candidate discourse about the economy when evaluating candidates. This is a critical point – the clarifying candidate’s best strategy according to the theory is to reduce voters’ uncertainty about the connection between economic conditions in the country and his candidacy. The theory posits that if the clarifying candidate does this, he has the best chance of winning the election, since the economy is always important to voters and most people prefer prosperity to decline. The fact that people’s comments about clarifying candidates who talk about the economy tightly reflect the economic discourse of the campaign is strong evidence that talking about the economy when it advantages your campaign has payoffs beyond merely being an incumbent in a good economy.

To put this simple bivariate relationship to a stronger test, in Table 6.2 I present the results of the same model I discussed in Table 6.1 – does advertising drive voters’ evaluations with greater weight for clarifying candidates who talk about the economy when incumbency, party, and other measures of campaign discourse are allowed to have an influence on comments?
### Table 6.2: The Effects of Campaign Content on Voters Evaluations of Candidates for Economic Mentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clarifying</th>
<th>Insurgent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>.19 (.07)</td>
<td>.06 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches</td>
<td>-.09 (.08)</td>
<td>.08 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Coverage</td>
<td>.03 (.07)</td>
<td>-.02 (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>.03 (.02)</td>
<td>.07 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-.00 (.01)</td>
<td>-.00 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.00 (.02)</td>
<td>.02 (.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| R²                             | .70        | .73       |
| N                              | 13         | 12        |

Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Campaign content is measured in percent of appeals in ads, speeches, or news coverage about the economy. The content analysis is done for each candidate in every year from 1952-2000. Voters’ comments are from the ANES open-ended likes-dislikes questions. Shaded cells indicate relationships significantly different from zero at a .05 level of confidence.

Once more, economic mentions in advertisements affect the composition of voters’ thoughts about clarifying candidates, but not about insurgent candidates. In fact, candidates have to increase economic content in their advertisements by five percentage points to get a one percentage point increase in economic mentions from voters, but insurgent candidates have to increase economic content by 16 percentage points to get the same increase from voters if the relationship exists at all.⁷
Table 6.3: Advertising Effectiveness on Economic Evaluations for Clarifying Candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clarifying Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>.26 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising &amp; No Focus on Economy</td>
<td>-.25 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Economy</td>
<td>.08 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>.05 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.07 (.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 = .85 \]
\[ N = 13 \]

Further support for the notion that candidates need to talk about the economy as well as be advantaged by it comes from evidence in Table 6.3. This table presents the results of advertising effectiveness on clarifying candidates who focused on the economy more than anything else, compared to those who did not behave this way. Since the number of cases gets quite small when we break the clarifying candidates up into these two sets, I estimate the effects using a single interactive model and reduce the model to its most parsimonious form. The results indicate that there is a significant difference between the effectiveness of advertising on the economy for these two groups of candidates. Clarifying candidates who focus on the economy increase voters’ economic considerations of them at a ratio of 4:1. That is, the percent of economic mentions among voters commentary about the candidate goes up 1 percent for every 4 percent increase in the candidates’ economic discourse. For the clarifying candidates who did not focus on the economy more than anything else in their campaigns, the relationship between ads and evaluations is nearly non-existent. The ratio
of advertising mentions to voters’ evaluations for clarifying candidates who do not focus on the economy is 100:1.

This is an important difference because it illustrates a critical feature of the American presidential election landscape: it is not enough to be the candidate who is advantaged by good economic times, you have to talk about those good times and remind voters of your role in fostering the period of economic growth. Even on national conditions as fundamental as the state of the nation’s economy, the behavior of candidates can matter to voter evaluations. These individual level findings corroborate the candidate and aggregate-level analyses in illustrating for a third time the importance of campaign rhetoric about the economy for those candidates who are advantaged by current conditions.

Interpreting coefficients across models often comes with furtive complications. To illustrate the importance of being advantaged by the economy and also talking about the economy more than anything else, I calculated the predicted levels of economic considerations given by voters broken out by candidate type. The same pattern emerges – the data show that voters will make more economic comments about the clarifying candidates, compared to insurgent candidates as the proportion of economic content in ads and speeches increases. Further, people are responsive to campaign discourse about the economy for clarifying candidates who make this the focus of their campaigns, compared to those clarifying candidates who do not. These results are presented in Figure 6.3. The last graph in Figure 6.3 shows the relationship between advertising about the economy and voters’ evaluations of insurgent candidates – separately for those insurgents who did not talk mainly about the economy and those who did.
Once more, the theory’s predictions are confirmed. The data show large differences in predicted levels of economic evaluations between clarifying candidates who make the economy a priority and those who do not. But the same difference is not as large for insurgent candidates. This is yet another test of whether merely talking about the economy (and not being advantaged by it) is enough to influence voters’ evaluations or whether the combination of good economic times and focusing voters’ minds on the connection to the clarifying party are both needed. It appears again, both are needed. It is not enough to be the incumbent in a period of growth or a challenger in a period of decline – candidates have to make that connection between their party and the economic times in order for voters’ evaluations to be sensitive on this topic.
CAMPAIGN EFFECTS: HOW MUCH DO VOTERS KNOW ABOUT CANDIDATES’ ISSUE POSITIONS AND DOES THE CAMPAIGN MATTER?

Voters’ comments about the clarifying candidates and the economy are driven by campaign content, specifically, advertising content. Even for some other issues, the data demonstrate a relationship between what candidates say and do in their campaigns and what voters’ think of them when asked to talk freely about the candidates. Having only 26 candidate-election pairs, however, limits the persuasiveness of this set of findings. In an attempt to show that the theory’s predictions are robust, I turn now to a completely different method of assessing whether candidate behavior matters to voters in the ways the theory of campaigns suggests. The next several pieces of evidence will use the ANES data, but not the open-ended questions. Instead, I turn to closed-ended questions about specific policies.

The ANES introduced a regular battery of issue questions in 1972 to tap in to citizens’ perceptions of candidates’ positions on issues. Respondents are asked to place themselves and if they can do that, they are asked to place each of the presidential candidates on the same issues. Several issues have been asked repeatedly over the last 34 years and some of them coincide with the kinds of things candidates were talking about or getting news coverage of in their campaigns, they are: whether the government ought to be responsible for making sure every American who wants a job can find one; whether we should cooperate with Russia; whether we are spending the right amount of money of national defense; whether the government ought to increase spending and services or cut both; and whether women should enter the workforce or stay home. The general question text, which changes for each issue and for whether the respondent is placing themselves or the candidates, reads:

Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think the government should
just let each person get ahead on his/their own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at pints 2,3,4,5 or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?¹⁰

Additionally, the ANES asks respondents to place themselves and candidates on an ideology scale that ranges from very liberal to very conservative.¹¹

These issue questions give us great leverage on whether voters know enough to place the candidates on the issues, and if so, whether those issues are important in evaluating candidates. The first thing that comes to mind, however, is a simple question: How good are voters at placing the candidates on these issues and where do they place the candidates relative to themselves?

Below, I present respondents’ placements of themselves and the candidates on these scales over the course presidential campaigns from 1972 to 2000. The square marks represent the average of respondents’ placements of themselves on the relevant issue, the circles denote the respondents’ average placements of Republican presidential candidates and the triangles are respondents’ placements, on average, of Democrats. The lines extending away from the mean estimates represent a single standard deviation in each direction.
Figure 6.4: Average Placements of Respondents and Presidential Candidates on Issue Scales, 1972-2000

- **Should Provide Jobs**
  - November
  - September

- **Should Not Provide Jobs**
  - November
  - September

- **Increase Spending**
  - November
  - September

- **Decrease Spending**
  - November
  - September

- **Cooperate with Russia**
  - November
  - September

- **Should not Cooperate**
  - November
  - September

- **Decrease Defense Spending**
  - November
  - September

- **Increase Defense Spending**
  - November
  - September

- **Should have Equal Role with Men**
  - November
  - September

- **Women's Role is in the Home**
  - November
  - September

- **Very Liberal**
  - November
  - September

- **Very Conservative**
  - November
  - September
A few things are at once obvious from Figure 6.4. Primarily, on average, people do a pretty good job of knowing that Republicans are more conservative than Democrats, even on complicated issues like equal rights for women or cooperation with Russia. Only in one case, equal rights for women, do respondents consider themselves more liberal on average than both political parties, and this estimate moves considerably over the course of campaigns, such that by Election Day, people place Democrats farther to the left and themselves closer to the middle. The second pattern that emerges from this figure, then, is that, on average, people place themselves between the two political parties on most issues, and this pattern does not change as the campaign progresses. The third interesting point to learn from Figure 6.4 is that there is a wide range of placements for people on all issues. In no case are people’s placements clustered tightly around the mean, instead, the lines extending out from the points in the figure suggest that people vary significantly in their placements of themselves and the candidates on these issues. The fourth pattern that is evident from this picture is that there is very little movement on these placements between Labor Day and Election Day, but this does not mean that the movement is independent of what candidates are doing in their campaigns.

Another interesting characteristic of these issue-placement scales is the fact that a lot of people cannot make a placement about themselves or the candidates on these issues. I assume that means they know so little about the candidates or the issue that they cannot even guess at what position on the scale might be reasonable. If the campaigns are reducing uncertainty of candidates’ issue positions, especially clarifying candidates’ positions on economic issues, then over the course of the campaign more people should be able to offer placements of the candidates on these scales. By dividing the campaign into 2 week intervals, I can measure the changes in how many people can place candidates on the issue during the campaign.
Figure 6.5: Changes in Mean Levels of Uncertainty from September to Election Day

In Figure 6.5 I show changes in the average level of non-placement on six issues from the first two weeks of September of the election year to the last two weeks before Election day.

The data show that clarifying candidates are in fact able to reduce the overall level of uncertainty about their positions on economic issues, like whether the government should guarantee jobs to everyone who wants to work. Insurgent candidates are not able to reduce the general level of uncertainty on this issue over the course of the campaign. Clarifying candidates, however, are also able to reduce people’s levels of uncertainty about their positions on the left-right ideological placement scale and also on the level of cooperation they desire with Russia. Insurgent candidates,
however, are not able to reduce people’s levels of uncertainty about any of the issues over the course of the campaign.

Are these differences meaningful? Using all the issue-candidate-year data, I test whether people’s abilities to place the clarifying candidates on the jobs question is systematically different from their ability to place the insurgent candidate – and different from either candidate on any other issue. In general, people are better able to place the clarifying candidates on issues at the beginning of the campaign by nearly 2 percentage points, and there does not seem to be anything systematically special about the jobs issue compared to others. Conditioning on the jobs issue, however, people are better able to place the clarifying candidate than the insurgent candidate by one percentage point. The data in the first column of Table 6.4 suggest that the benefit of being a clarifying candidate is a reduction in voter uncertainty about your position on guaranteed jobs of about 3.5 points.

Over the course of the campaign, as the clarifying candidates talk about the economy and help voters connect their party to prosperity, the data show that people learn more about clarifying candidates on the economy than they do about either candidate on other issues. The second column of Table 6.4 presents the changes in average non-placement levels from September to November. In terms of campaign learning, it is not enough to merely be the clarifying candidate, the direct effects on this indicator are indistinguishable from zero. Again, however, conditional on being the clarifying candidate, people are better able to make placements on the jobs question. The average reduction in uncertainty for clarifying candidates on the economy over the course of the campaign is almost 2 percentage points. These findings provide strong support for the theory of campaigns. Clarifying candidates experience greater reductions in uncertainty than insurgent candidates on economic issues as they are talking about these issues over the course of the campaign.
### Table 6.4: Reductions in Mean Levels of Issue Uncertainty for Eight Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Non-placement</th>
<th>Change in Mean Non-placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>-.018 (.005)</td>
<td>-.002 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>-.024 (.015)</td>
<td>-.007 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying*Jobs</td>
<td>.010 (.005)</td>
<td>-.008 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.351 (.041)</td>
<td>.015 (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in Mean Placements for Candidate Types</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>-.017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are respondents’ abilities to place each candidate on eight different issues: guaranteed jobs, defense spending, cooperation with Russia, services v. spending, the role of women, aid to minorities or black, government supplied health insurance, and the ideological left-right scale in every year from 1972-2000. Not all issues are asked in each year. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent cannot place the candidate on the issue, thus negative coefficients indicate reductions in uncertainty levels. Cell entries are regression coefficients generated by regressing whether the candidate in question was the clarifying candidate, whether the issue is jobs, the interaction of these two variables, and indicators for each year (coefficients suppressed), except 1972. Changes over the course of the campaign are defined as the difference between the first two weeks of September and the last two weeks of November. Standard errors are clustered on issue.

To be clearer, it is not the case that clarifying candidates exhibit greater reductions in uncertainty over the course of the campaign in general, these effects are particular to the jobs issue.

Average rates of non-placement are indicative of people’s levels of uncertainty about candidates over the course of the campaign, but one of the advantages of individual level data is the ability to allow different people to have different reactions to conditions. For example, people who pay more attention to the campaign in the media may show greater reductions in uncertainty about issues than those who pay little attention. Education may
play a role in how much people learn about the candidates. To control for these various factors, I model issue non-placement separately for the issues mentioned above by including controls for attention to the campaign in the media, time of interview, the interaction of these two things, which is essentially the test of campaign learning, and various demographic variables (age, race, gender, and education). The average predicted levels of non-placement, broken out by particular issues confirm the story told by the mean levels of non-placement above. There does not appear to be anything special about just being the clarifying candidate, one of the largest reduction in uncertainty over the course of the campaign about any issue comes from placing clarifying candidates on the jobs issue (similar learning is demonstrated for cooperation with the Russians). This effect, however, is seen clearly among those people paying high levels of attention to the campaign in the media.

The comparison between the people who pay no attention to the campaign in the media and those who pay a lot of attention is another test of the theory. For those who pay no attention to the campaign in the media, the data show average reductions in the change in clarifying candidate uncertainty from September to November for jobs, services, and cooperation with Russia. Insurgent candidates show reductions in the average change in uncertainty on defense spending and cooperation with Russia. The other issues show increased average levels of non-placement over the course of the campaign for both candidates. This is essentially the effect of the passage of time absent any media campaign coverage.

The second panel of the figure, for people paying high levels of attention to the campaign in the media, shows reductions in uncertainty, on average, for all issues and all candidates. This is evidence of campaign learning. From September to November, people who pay attention to the campaign in the news are better able, on average, to place candidates on all issues at the end of the campaign. This is not true for people who do not encounter the campaign in the news.
Figure 6.6: Changes in Average Predicted Probability of Non-placement over the Course of the Campaign by variations in Level of Attention to Campaign in Media

Each bar in the figure represents the average change in respondents’ predicted probabilities of non-placement for the clarifying candidate on the related issue from the first two weeks of September to the two weeks before Election Day compared to the average predicted probabilities of doing the same for the insurgent candidate. Decreases in uncertainty indicate learning over the period of the campaign. Predicted probabilities of non-placement are generated from 14 probit analyses with willingness to place each candidate on each issue as the dependent variables. Explanatory variables include level of attention to the campaign in the media, date of interview, demographic controls, and indicators for campaign year. Standard errors are robust and clustered on campaign year.

The largest reduction in uncertainty over the course of the campaign is for the placement of clarifying candidates on the economy and on cooperation with Russia. The reduction in uncertainty for clarifying candidates is more than twice as large as the reduction for insurgent candidates. People are, on average, approximately five percent more likely to place the clarifying candidate on the issue of guaranteed jobs at the end of the campaign than they are at the beginning of the campaign. For
insurgent candidates, the average increase in likelihood of placement on this issue is only about one and half percent, on average. This is another piece of evidence supporting the theory. Even controlling for demographics, year-specific effects, and media attention, the effects for clarifying candidates on the jobs issue are distinguishable from the others.12

It is not enough to be an incumbent party nominee in a good economy or a challenger in a time of economic decline. Candidates who make this connection the most important message of their campaign discourse affect what voters think and know about them and ultimately, they win elections. I demonstrated this pattern at the candidate level in Chapter 5; and, as a test for mechanisms driving the candidate level pattern, I show effects of candidate discourse at the individual level in this Chapter. The economy matters, but how candidates react to it matters, too. The Clinton campaign in 1992 seemed to understand this. In Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign headquarters a sign hung that read, “It’s the economy, stupid”. This adage turns out to be more right than maybe even Clinton and his strategist James Carville imagined. The economy matters because it determines which candidates can talk about which issues in campaigns; it is always an important consideration to voters; and, it is critical that candidates advantaged by the economic situation talk about it during the campaign more than they talk about anything else and more than their opponents, even if they are incumbents. Clinton and Carville probably knew this, as the sign was inward facing, to remind people who were talking to the press, writing ad copy, or drafting speeches, and to remind the candidate himself that the campaign’s message was simple: remind voters that times were not as good as they seemed at the hands of George H.W. Bush.

**Insurgent Candidates:**
**Changing the Debate by Increasing the Importance of Issues**
The previous section detailed the connections between what candidates talk about on the campaign trail and what voters say about candidates during the same time period. Citizens make more comments about the economy when asked to describe the candidates, and they are better able to place clarifying candidates on economic issue scales if the clarifying candidate talks mainly about the economy in ads or speeches. But, sometimes clarifying candidates lose elections. These losses are not merely caused by errors on the part of clarifying candidates (a few win even though they do not talk mainly about the economy). The other important element of electioneering is, of course, what the insurgent candidate is doing along side the clarifying candidate.

Recall that the insurgent candidate needs to focus the election off of the economy and onto some other issue. Specifically, an issue on which he is closer to the average American than his opponent, and an issue on which his opponent is committed to an unpopular position. It also helps if public opinion on the issue is lopsided, that is, that opinion on the issue is not split between the two candidate’s positions. It does little good to increase the importance of an issue on which half the people will favor the opponent’s position. The kinds of things insurgent candidates choose to talk about as their insurgent issues vary across year and party, but typically they fall in to two broad categories: foreign and domestic policy.

In the early fifties, Stevenson tried to refocus the elections on to Eisenhower’s mishandling of the Korean War. In 1960, Kennedy painted a picture of both foreign and domestic decline as he compared the US to the Soviets. Mondale wanted to portray Reagan in 1984 as reckless and aggressive in his possible reactions to the Soviets. And in 2000, George Bush offered leadership for solving domestic problems that was bi-partisan, kinder, compassionate – yet conservative and market driven. A few insurgent candidates centered their campaigns around economic issues (McGovern, Dole) and thereby, according to the theory, helped their opponents win the election.
How successful are the insurgent candidates at increasing the importance of their chosen insurgent issues? Using the same NES data, collected over the period from 1972 to 2000, I create a measure for “insurgent issue” that varies by election year. Thus, the insurgent issue questions I use in the remainder of the book are constructed such that each year relates to that specific candidate’s insurgent issue. So, the observations on the insurgent issue for 1980, for example, always refers to foreign policy – specifically, our relations with the Soviet Union and the willingness of the U.S. to go to war. For 2000, they always deal with domestic policy – education, social security, and healthcare. To organize the analyses that follow in a tractable manner, I define three different classes of insurgent candidates, which escalate in accordance with how many of the insurgent candidate prescriptions the candidate follows. At the high end of the adherence scale are those insurgent candidates who meet all the insurgent candidate criteria laid out by the theory. That is, they talk about something other than the economy; they are closer to most voters than their opponent on this issue; and, their opponent is committed to his unpopular position on this issue. I defined these candidates as Kennedy, Nixon (1960), Carter (1976), and George W. Bush (2000). For the remainder of the book, I classify these candidates as fully meeting the theory’s criteria. The remainder of the candidates I classify as those who violate at least one of the theory’s prescriptions. Because decisions about whether the candidates satisfy the theory’s corollaries may seem subjective to some (it is a matter of some judgment to determine whether Eisenhower actually was “soft on communism” or whether Reagan truly was “a hawk” who preferred military solutions to diplomatic ones), I relax the requirements and create a second class of candidates who satisfy the first and arguably most important criteria – they talk about something other than the economy. These insurgent candidates include Stevenson, Kennedy, Goldwater, Carter in 1976, George W. Bush in 2000, George H.W. Bush in 1992, Dukakis, Mondale, and
Carter in 1980. I will refer to this class of candidates as the “not economy”
group in subsequent tests.

If the theory is a good explanation of how insurgent candidates win
elections, the candidates who meet the theory’s criteria will show the
greatest effects of priming their insurgent issues during the campaign. Each
year, the NES asks respondents to name the nation’s most important
problem. I use this measure as a first test for whether the various classes of
insurgent candidates are successful at increasing the importance of their
insurgent issues over the course of the campaign.

Figure 6.7 plots the mean percent of respondents who named the
insurgent issue as the nation’s most important problem by date of interview
(broken into roughly two week segments) for each of the classes of
insurgent candidates. Care should be taken not to make too much of the
time trend in these figures, since the NES does not employ a sampling
design that generates representativeness at the daily, weekly, or monthly
level. There is, however, little reason to believe that the people who
participate in the face-to-face interviews in the first weeks of the period are
systematically different from those who participate in the last few weeks.
Thus, any interesting trends based on time of interview should be taken as
suggestive of a larger pattern with this caveat in mind.
The first thing to notice about the data in Figure 6.7 is that early in the campaign period, the mean levels of incidence are clustered together, around 23 to 29 percent of respondents name the insurgent issue as the nation’s most important problem. Over time, however, a compelling blueprint emerges. Insurgent candidate who violate the theory’s prescriptions are not able to increase the importance of their issue in voters’ minds. The line tracing their proportion over the campaign is nearly flat—and remains the lowest of the three lines. In direct contrast, the insurgent candidates who fully meet the theory’s criteria show a marked jump in the proportion of respondents who think their issue is the most important in the country. Nearly half of those asked (47 percent) in the last two weeks of September think the insurgent candidate’s issue is the most important issue in the nation. This is an 18 point increase over the percentage of people who think this in the first two weeks of September; and, a 28 point increase over the issues of candidates who violate the theory’s criteria (for the same
period of interviews). As evidence that this pattern is not being driven by sampling error within the time periods, the same differences exist between the first two weeks of September and the first two weeks of October. Further support for the robustness of these trends comes from the data for insurgent candidates who talk about something other than the economy. The percentage of respondents who think their insurgent issue is the most important reaches a high of 34 in the last half of September and drops slightly to 31 during the first weeks of October. These numbers are between the numbers for insurgent candidates who get it wrong and those who get it right. In other words, getting it half-right (talking about something other than the economy, but not something on which you are uniquely advantaged vis-à-vis your opponent) lands a candidate half way between the individual level effects of those who violate and those who fully meet the theory’s criteria. Finally, all the classes of insurgent candidates show declines in the percentage of people who name the insurgent issue as the nation’s most important in the last weeks of the campaign. Only the insurgent candidates who get it all right end up with an overall increase (6 points) in the importance of the insurgent issue. Like the volatility and reversion Gelman and King (1994) illustrated with public opinion polls over the course of the campaign, these individual level data show movement during the campaign period with reversion to the starting position.

The evidence from Figure 6.7 suggests that insurgent candidates who behave as the theory suggests are successful at priming their issue in the minds of voters. But, the question remains: Does the importance of this issue matter to a vote choice on Election Day? In order to learn whether increasing the importance of the insurgent issue helps these insurgent candidates at the polls, I present the results in Figure 6.8. The vertical bars represent the predicted probability of vote for the clarifying candidate (the predicted winner) as a function of whether respondents named the insurgent issue as the nation’s most important problem. I present these comparisons
for each of the three classes of insurgent candidates and, across different levels of respondents’ political information.
The first two bars of Figure 6.8 show that insurgent candidates who meet the criteria for a good insurgent issue are able to keep support for the clarifying candidate below 50 percent if they are successful at priming their issue. If they are not successful at priming, support for the clarifying candidate jumps by nearly 10 percentage points, and crosses the 50 percent mark. This relationship is more pronounced for low-information voters, who seem especially susceptible to the campaign. If the insurgent candidates who fully meet the criteria can prime their issue, low-information voters are more likely to vote for them by 14 percentage points. Taken in concert with the results presented in the previous figure, a story of insurgent campaign effects takes shape. Insurgent candidates who meet the theory’s criteria are successful at priming the insurgent issue’s importance over the course of the campaign – and, voters who believe the insurgent issue is the nation’s most important problem are more likely to vote for the
insurgent candidate, especially if they are low political information voters. This means that as the importance of the insurgent issue increases over the course of the campaign, support for the insurgent candidate goes up. This campaign effects story is particular to insurgent candidates who choose wisely as they pick an insurgent issue and who are successful at priming its importance in the minds of voters. Insurgent candidates who talk about something other than the economy, but do not pay heed to their advantage over their opponent on this issue, are again between the level of effects for those candidates who totally get the issue wrong and those who fully get it right. Support for the clarifying candidate among these elections remains above 50 percent in the whole sample, even if the insurgent candidate primes his issue. Among low political information voters, however, support for the clarifying candidate drops to 46 percent if the insurgent candidate is successful at priming his issue. Once again, low-information voters show themselves to be most susceptible to campaign efforts. The campaign effects for these candidates who almost get it right are also much smaller, in the range of 2 to 5 points, in the whole sample and among low-information voters, respectively.

The use of respondent’s self-report of the nation’s most important problem to explain changes in vote share is not ideal as it is possible that the campaign is influencing both of these things in real time, such that it may not be possible to isolate the causal direction in this relationship. Maybe ideas about the nation’s most important problem drive vote, but maybe vote preference drives ideas about the nation’s most important problem. This problem is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the effects of insurgent campaigns seem to stack neatly in accordance with the level of the insurgent candidates adherence to the theory’s prescriptions. The worst-case interpretation suggests that insurgent candidates who behave as predicted increase votes and also prime their issue; instead of prime their issue and then increase votes. The models in this section all include indicator variables for election year, which is critical in tracing the
possibility that there is just something particular about a certain year that leads people to vote for the insurgent candidate and think his insurgent issue is the most important in the nation. In the presence of these controls, the results in Figure 6.8 suggest that candidate behavior in campaigns is important to electoral outcomes. Again, it is not enough to talk about an issue other than the economy if you are the insurgent candidate. Insurgent candidates have to choose insurgent issues on which they benefit from one-sided public opinion and on which their opponents are committed to unpopular positions.

In addition to making the insurgent issue more important to voters over the course of the campaign, insurgent candidates can also gain advantages by persuading people that the relative distance between the voter’s position on the insurgent issue and the candidate’s position is closer for insurgent candidates than it is for clarifying candidates. In other words, they can attempt to demonstrate or even change their advantage on the issue. This is a test of the insurgent candidate’s ability to persuade voters. To elucidate whether insurgent candidates can do this over an 8-week campaign period, I return to the issue position scales I used in the last section. For each issue, as the theory illustrates, I take the difference between the candidate’s position and the voter’s position for each issue and square the value such that all distance measures are expressed in positive numbers. Greater values indicate there is a larger distance between the voter and the candidate. I do this for both the clarifying and insurgent candidates on each issue. To answer the question, “to which candidate is the voter closest?” I simply subtract the clarifying candidate’s squared distance from the insurgent candidate’s squared distance. This gives me a relative measure of proximity for this issue. Negative values of this difference in distances indicate the voter is closer to the insurgent candidate. Positive numbers indicate the opposite. For example, if the voter placed both of the candidates and him or herself at exactly the same point on the issue scale (regardless of where that was on the scale), the squared
differences for each candidate would be zero and the difference in distances would be zero. If a voter placed both candidates at positive 6 and him or herself at 1, each squared distance would be 25 and again, the difference in distances would be zero. On the other hand, if a voter placed the clarifying candidate at 6, the insurgent at 1, and him or herself at 4, the squared distance to the clarifying candidate would be 4 (6-4=2 and 2² = 4) and the squared distance to the insurgent candidate would be 9. Thus the difference in distance would be nine minus four – five. Since this is a positive number, we know that the voter is closer to the clarifying candidate. The difference in distance measure can range from -36 to +36. In truth, most values fall near the zero mark, but are not actually zero. Certainly, none are greater than +/-10.

If insurgent candidates are successful, they not only prime the importance of their insurgent issue, but they choose an issue on which they are closer to voters than the clarifying candidate – or, they try to convince voters of this over the course of the campaign. Figure 6.9 presents the changes in average values of the difference in distance measure for the insurgent issues over the course of the campaign. Again, I present these data for the three different classes of insurgent candidates and broken out in the bottom two panels by voters levels of political information. Of primary importance is the fact that the classes of insurgent candidate again stack in the correct order. The insurgent candidates who violate the typology consistently show small advantages for the clarifying candidate (positive values on the Y axis) and very little change over the course of the campaign. Insurgents who talk about something other than the economy, but pay no heed to their advantage on the issue fall between the other two types of insurgents. Not surprisingly, the trend for these candidates hovers around the zero point as the campaign goes on. This illustrates the possibility that the clarifying candidate is demonstrating to voters that he holds exactly the same position as the insurgent candidate – which is why the theory’s second corollary is so important: the clarifying candidate
should be committed to his unpopular position. Remember Eisenhower pointing out that he in fact was not soft on communism by referencing the Berlin Air Lift and declaring, “I shall go to Korea, I shall end the War!” Similarly, Reagan argued against the claim that he was reckless and prone to start a nuclear war by holding up as evidence the SALT II Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that he co-authored and signed with the Soviets only months before the election started. Even the starting point for this middle class of insurgent candidates suggests these candidates did not pick issues on which they were naturally and clearly advantaged. Compare their starting points in early September to the starting values for the insurgents who fully adhere to all of the theory’s criteria.
Figure 6.9: Differences in Squared Issue Distances over Campaign

Changes in Relative Squared Issue Distances over Campaign

Low Information Voters

High Information Voters
On average, insurgents who get it right finish the campaign 1 unit closer to voters on the insurgent issue compared to the clarifying candidate. Those insurgent candidates who do not choose a winning issue but talk about something other than the economy end the campaign with voters believing that the clarifying and the insurgent candidate hold the same position on the insurgent issue (zero difference). Among low-information voters, the trends once again are magnified. During the height of the campaign, the low-information voters report differences as large as -4 points on the difference in distance measure. This large insurgent-advantage goes away over time, however, even for the insurgents who meet all the theory’s criteria. Among high information voters, insurgent candidates end up with only a small advantage, but an advantage none-the-less.

The differences in the dynamics between low and high information voters are also informative. Low information voters show considerable volatility throughout the campaign period, becoming very close to the insurgent candidate for those candidates who choose a winning issue but then reverting back to a position of indifference between the two candidates on this issue by the end of the campaign. The high information voters begin the campaign closer to the insurgent candidate on his winning issue, but over the course of the campaign, the high information voters steadily become indifferent between the two candidates on this issue, although the insurgent candidate keeps a slight advantage among high information voters, whereas this advantage is completely lost among low information voters. It is not hard to imagine an explanation for these trends: clarifying candidates who try to neutralize the insurgent issue are doing a good job of convincing voters that the advantages of going with the insurgent candidate on this issue are not great. Although these data are speculative, the fact that this same reversion to indifference does not happen for insurgent candidates who violate all of the theory’s mandates suggests that there is something particular about the non-economic insurgent issues that candidates choose,
which leads voters to erode their support for the insurgent candidates on
these issues.

Low-information voters may not be the only susceptible voters in
the population. Campaigns may also exhibit greater effects among self-
described independents, or those with no political party affiliation. Figure
6.10 presents the results for differences in distances broken out by party
type.
Of primary importance again is the fact that the lines, across all categories of party identification, stack in the correct order. Among respondents who identify with the clarifying candidate’s party (this can change in a given election year, sometimes it is the Democrats and sometimes it is the Republicans) the stacking is less clear, but mainly, insurgent candidates that behave as expected fare better in voters’ minds than those who violate the theory’s prescriptions. It is also reassuring that the collection of lines for each type of party identification sort out in the expected rank ordering: Clarifying partisans see themselves as always closer to the clarifying candidate on the insurgent issue. Insurgent partisans see themselves as always closer to the insurgent candidate on the insurgent issue. And independents see themselves as somewhere in the middle. In fact, independents end up in the last few weeks of the campaign rating themselves as slightly closer to the clarifying candidate if the insurgent
candidate talks about something other than the economy, but, they end up slightly closer to the insurgent candidate if these candidates also talk about an issue on which they are closer to most voters and on which their opponent is committed to an unpopular position. Independents also show a familiar trend over the first few weeks of the campaign – they are most affected by the candidates’ behaviors in the latter part of September, but then slowly revert to ending points that are close to where they started. This is the same trend that exists for low information voters. It seems that low information voters and independents are the most easily influenced by the campaign in its initial period, and the advantages they give to candidates during this time dissipate as the campaign wears on. Again, it is difficult to isolate the cause of this reversion. Campaigning from the opposition seems like the most obvious explanation, especially since the probability of voting for the insurgent candidate remains positive (despite the reversion) for insurgents who choose winning issues, but becomes negative for those insurgents who choose poorly. Other more complicated explanations are imaginable, including the possibility that even low information and independent voters are predisposed to support one or the other of the candidates, and despite being swayed by short term information during the campaign, these movable voters return to their original preferences on election day. Fortunately, each of these explanations is interesting from a campaign perspective. Unfortunately, one of them implies that campaigns matter a great deal to voters (the first explanation), and the other implies that they do not matter at all.

The observable range of the differences in distances on the insurgent issue goes from +5 (clarifying partisans) to -7 (insurgent partisans). How important are these relative distances in predicting the vote? To assess this, I model vote for the clarifying candidate as a function of the difference in distances on two issues – the insurgent issue and the clarifying issue (which is most often an economic question about guaranteed jobs for those who want to work). Controls in this model include gender, age, and party
identification. Results show that both issues have substantively and statistically significant effects on the vote. The closer a voter is to the clarifying candidate on either issue, the more likely they are to vote for that candidate, and vice versa. These results are presented graphically, for different levels of differences in Figure 6.11.

These results are presented for three different levels of differences on the insurgent issue: no difference between the candidates, a small difference of 4 units closer to the insurgent candidate than the clarifying candidate, and larger difference of 25 units closer to the insurgent candidate. For each level of difference, I calculate the probability of voting for the clarifying candidate holding all the other variables at their means. Along with displaying the expected and now familiar pattern of stacked lines, the results also show the importance of choosing an insurgent issue on which the candidate is closer to most voters than his opponent. When voters see no difference between the two candidates (the difference in distances is 0), the probability of voting for the clarifying candidate is greater than 60 percent, regardless of whether the insurgent candidate chose wisely when picking his insurgent issue. Being equidistant from both candidates on the insurgent issue does not lead voters to cast ballots for the insurgent candidate. Relative issue proximity matters to voters in predictable ways.
Figure 6.11: Predicted Vote for Clarifying Candidate by Difference in Distances and Insurgent Campaign Type

The insurgent candidate has to share his position on this issue with voters in a way that his opponent cannot. Even when voters are just slightly closer to the insurgent candidate on the insurgent issue (4 units of difference) the probability of voting for the clarifying candidate drops slightly and nearly crosses the 50 percent mark for those candidates who heed the theory’s counsel. But at greater levels of difference (25 units), the benefits become very clear. For insurgent candidates who choose issues on which they have a relative advantage and on which their opponent cannot change his position, a difference in distances of this magnitude results in less than a 10 percent chance of voting for the clarifying candidate. Figure 6.11 illustrates
the importance of issue position proximity to election outcomes. To reiterate, this finding underscores the importance of the insurgent issue and its characteristics. If there is no difference between the candidates on the insurgent issue, the clarifying candidate will win the election handily. The economic advantage is substantial and it has real benefits. If there are small perceived differences on the insurgent issue that benefit the insurgent candidate, and the clarifying candidate is committed to his unpopular position, the insurgent candidate can win the election by a narrow margin. And, finally, if there are large advantages for the insurgent candidate, he will win elections.

The effects of the differences in distance on the insurgent issue vary by levels of political information and by partisanship, just as the average differences did. Figure 6.12 presents the effects for political information. In this case, high political information voters show slightly greater rates of change in the probability of voting for the clarifying candidate as their proximity to the insurgent candidate changes. Unlike the previous data, this evidence seems to suggest that the high information people are more affected by the campaign. In truth, what these data show is that the high information people know how to use the proximity measures in their political calculations, while the low political information people are less affected by these changes in relative distance to the candidates. Low information voters may be more susceptible to campaign efforts at persuasion, as demonstrated by their marked shifts on differences in
Figure 6.12: Predicted Vote for Clarifying Candidate by Difference in Distances on Insurgent Issue and Levels of Political Information

Results are predicted probabilities of voting for the clarifying candidate at different levels of relative issue proximity and two levels of political information or sophistication. The categories of distance represent 0 units of difference (No Difference), four units (Slightly Closer), and 25 units (Very Close). Predicted probabilities are generated from 6 probit analyses using self-reported vote choice as the dependent variable. Independent variables include demographic controls and respondent partisanship. Standard Errors are robust and clustered on election year.

distances over the course of the campaign, but once the relative differences have changed, they affect the low information voters less than they would those who are more political aware. This is an interesting conundrum for candidates – *precisely those people they are able to persuade are the people for whom issue proximity matters the least.*

Figure 6.13 presents the effectiveness of relative issue proximity for different partisan identifiers. Once again, insurgent candidates who behave as the theory suggests do better than those who do not, across all categories of partisanship. As with the data on average differences over time, these results show the importance of the self-identified independents to election
outcomes and candidate strategies. If independent voters see no differences on the insurgent issue between the candidates, they are likely to vote for the clarifying candidate. Again, this is the power of context and the economic advantage. If independent identifiers see slight differences between the candidates, they approach a point on indecision, and large differences place them squarely on the side of the insurgent candidate. In fact, in the face of large issue differences favoring the insurgent candidate, nearly all voters have a high probability of voting for the clarifying candidate, with the exception of clarifying partisan identifiers in elections with insurgent candidates who violate the theory’s predictions in some way. They remain loyal to their clarifying candidate even as the advantage on the insurgent issue turns to favor the insurgent candidate.
The behavior of candidates in campaigns does affect voters in elections. Clarifying candidates who talk about the economy more than anything else and more than their opponents can reduce voters’ levels of uncertainty about economic issues like jobs and unemployment. Voters are better able to associate the economy with clarifying candidates who follow the theory’s mandates than they are with clarifying candidates who do not. In further illustration of the importance of candidate behavior, candidates can prime issues over the course of the campaign if they choose issues on which they have a solid advantage (closer to most voters and the opponent is constrained to an unpopular position). Voters increasingly think these issues are important problems in the country and these assessments affect
vote choice in substantively important ways. All of this is particularly true for voters with low levels of political information or sophistication and independents. They are the most susceptible to campaign influences, especially in the early weeks of the campaign. As time wears on, however, the advantages gained are lost. To make matters worse, these susceptible voters actually use the new information they receive from campaigns less than their more informed and partisan counterparts when making a vote decision.

The individual level data presented here, in some cases only suggestive of trends in the right direction, nonetheless illustrate nicely the mechanisms that drive the spatial model of campaign competition. Not only do aggregate election forecasts and candidate-level tests establish the theory’s explanatory and predictive capabilities, these individual-level data corroborate the foundations on which the theory is built. Why is the economy a strong predictor of election outcomes? Finally, there is an individual level explanation for this regularity beyond pocketbook voting. The economy matters because the candidate who benefits from it talks about it a lot during the campaign and this makes voters more aware of the condition and this candidate’s relationship to it. Why is it so difficult for a challenger to defeat an economically advantaged candidate? Because finding the right issue onto which the electoral agenda can be reset is difficult and candidates are challenged by it. Those who find such an issue, however, can make it more important to voters over the course of the campaign and narrowly edge out the economically advantaged candidate. Candidates and campaigns matter to outcomes despite the importance of the nation’s economy.
Cited Works (Incomplete)


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Notes

1 The ANES has undergone a series of name changes over the years, the most recent from the National Election Study to its current name in 2005. Prior to that, it was called the Michigan Election Study (1948-1976).

2 Funding sources included the University of Michigan Survey Research Center and the Social Science Research Council, Office of the Provost, and Department of Political Science; the Carnegie Corporation, the Rockefeller Foundation, IBM, the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Markle Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, Center for Investigation and Research on Civic Learning and Education, and Stanford University (IRIS program).

3 In 1972, the ANES recorded 3 rather than 5 items for each question.

4 While concerns are sometimes expressed that these open-ended questions are overly sensitive to the momentary accessibility of one or another consideration in respondents' minds, Geer (1991) shows that respondents' comments do not indiscriminately reflect recently encountered information.

5 For all of the data presented in the remainder of this chapter, information about numbers of cases for each election year, for each subset (clarifying v. insurgent, partisanship, information-level, etc . . .) can be found in the Appendix. For the years under investigation, the NES data has 25,502 respondents. From 1972 forward, when NES began asking the 7-point issue scales used at the end of this chapter, the total number of respondents is 16,870.

6 I do this using OLS regression and controlling for incumbency status and party. I cluster the standard errors around campaign year.

7 These effects are calculated using the coefficients in the table. The .19 proportional increase for clarifying candidates results in a 5 to 1 effort (100/19 = 5.26). The similar effect for insurgent candidates is one-sixteenth (100/6=16.6).

8 If I run a fully interactive model including incumbency and party, the results do not change substantively, although the coefficient on the direct effect of advertising goes up 6 points and the coefficient on the interaction increases in negativity by 4 points. To allow the most degrees of freedom as possible, I present the model with only advertising and incumbency in Table 6.3.

9 After 1996, the ANES sometimes asked respondents to place the candidates even if they could not place themselves. For consistencies sake, I only use candidate placements for respondents who could place themselves in all years.

10 This wording was used in some years, and in other years they did not specify “suppose these people are at one end …” For exact question wording see Appendix.

11 For exact question wording see Appendix.

12 Results from the issue models show that the interaction between media attention and time of interview (the test for learning) is significantly different from zero for clarifying candidates on the economy, but not for any other issues. The results are discernable from zero for insurgent candidates on no issues.
13 These differences are robust to varying definitions of time periods. The middle and end part of the campaign seem systematically different than the beginning.

14 These results are generated from 9 probit analyses using post-election vote report as the dependent variable. Independent variables include an indicator for whether the respondent named the insurgent issue as the nation’s most important along with controls for election year, race, gender, age, and party identification. The probabilities for each class of insurgent candidate are calculated in separate probit models, as are the results for different levels of political information.

15 As reported earlier, a fair number of people are unable to place the candidates or themselves on these issue scales. In the analyses that follow, missing values on issue scales were imputed using conventional techniques. Results are robust to this process.

16 Standard errors are robust and clustered on campaign year.