POLITAINMENT: THE TEN RULES OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS
A citizens’ guide to understanding campaigns and elections

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politainer
(pawl.ə.TAYN.ər) n. A politician who is or was an entertainer; a politician who makes extensive use of entertainment media, particularly during a campaign. —adj.
—politainment n.

http://www.wordspy.com/words/politainer.asp
## Contents

Acknowledgments

Welcome to the New World of Politainment 1

The Ten Rules in a Nutshell 6

Rule 1: Politics Is Like Selling Beer 7
(Politics is about telling a story.)

Rule 2: Annie’ Is Right 16
(Politics is always about tomorrow.)

Rule 3: Rod Stewart Is Right 23
(Politics is about passion.)

Rule 4: Politics Is About Mobilizing Your Base 26
(It is also about demobilizing the opposition.)

Rule 5: It’s a Bar Fight 37
(Politics is about winning over the swing voter.)

Rule 6: Woody Allen Was Right 41
(Politics is about who shows up; 90% of life is showing up.)

Rule 7: Image Is Everything 46
(Politics is about defining or being defined.)

Rule 8: The Multimedia Is the Message 49
(Politics is about using the best new technologies to communicate a message.)

Rule 9: Be True to Yourself 57
(Politics is about being who you are and being a clown; be real and laugh at yourself.)
Rule 10: Show Me the Money 61
(Politics is a business.)

Three Final Rules 64

About the Author 67
Acknowledgments

After nearly 25 years of teaching, countless interviews with reporters, and hundreds of presentations, it is impossible to acknowledge and thank all those individuals who have helped me develop and refine the ideas in this book. I especially want to acknowledge and thank members of the local Minnesota media who asked me lots of tough and interesting questions about American politics. Thanks to all of you.
Welcome to the New World of Politainment

The world of politics, campaigns, and elections is confusing. How do citizens like you and I make sense out of why candidates do what they do or why some are successful and others not? The purpose of this book is to explain political campaigns and elections by way of ten simple rules that candidates need to follow if they wish to be successful. Mastering and understanding these rules makes clear what it takes to win in politics and why politicians do what they do and why politics is what it is today.

The key to understanding contemporary politics begins with two simple concepts. The first is that it is the world of politainment. What’s politainment? In 1998, when Jesse Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota, a graduate student and I published an article arguing that Jesse was one of the first politainers—a politician crossed with an entertainer. Ventura understood that the worlds of politics and entertainment had collapsed into one another, producing a new world of politainment (politics + entertainment).

In several articles and in two books of mine on the media and politics, I described this new world of politainment. It is a world of multimedia advertising, where news competes with and apes traditional entertainment media, and where candidates seek to cast themselves as personalities or celebrities and use nontraditional forms of communication and venues to reach audiences. Comedy Central and the Colbert Report are just the most recent examples of this new culture of politainment.

Politicians throughout U.S. history have made use of the media in their campaigns and during their terms of office. Political campaigns have continually adapted to the media and marketing practices of their times. In his book, Adcult USA, James Twitchell cites the “defining event of political maneuvering” in advertising as the 1952 election campaign of Dwight Eisenhower. A man named Rossier Reeves
masterminded a highly successful campaign called “Eisenhower Answers America,” in which Eisenhower answered on television a series of questions generated by Reeves but asked on camera by average citizens. Decades later, Ronald Reagan did exactly what Rossier Reeves was attempting to do for Eisenhower. He traded intellectual content for emotional appeal. John F. Kennedy, too, used television innovatively. As common wisdom has it, Kennedy’s appearance on the first televised presidential debate with Nixon helped him win the election. Kennedy’s superb television presence contrasted so greatly with Richard Nixon’s lack of presence that some say it cost Nixon the election. Bill Clinton, too, pushed his use of the media farther than any previous president when he went on MTV, and when he played the saxophone on Arsenio Hall’s TV show. He and his wife Hillary periodically used morning and prime-time interview shows (for example, the Barbara Walters Specials and The Today Show) to get particular messages out.

During the 2000 presidential race, Jay Leno and David Letterman hosted candidates John McCain, George W. Bush, and Al Gore. David Letterman even employed a long-running stunt, Campaign 2000, in a successful effort to hype ratings by enticing New York Senate candidate Hillary Clinton to appear on his show. For Letterman the purpose was clear: better ratings. But for the candidates, the free exposure was invaluable, and the result was a faint effort at emulating Ventura’s success in bridging the politics and entertainment gap. In fact, Ms. Clinton, who used “Hillary!” as her slogan (reminiscent of other first-name-only celebrities such as Madonna and Cher), seemed poised to make a bid for public office using her first name much like a brand name for a product. “Buy Hillary! New and improved!” Bill Clinton playing the sax on Arsenio Hall was classic politainment.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTkUeb6zQFA&feature=related

The same was true with Arnold Schwarzenegger declaring his candidacy for governor on Leno. Presidential
Politainment

appearances on the late-night talk shows demonstrate the proof and power of politainment, and Tina Fey impersonating Sarah Palin in 2008 (and the latter’s appearance on SNL) confirm the reality of politainment.

Overall, the trend toward celebrity news dovetails with the emergence of celebrity politicians.

Clearly, there is historical precedent for politicians’ use of the media. What is different about a politainer’s use of the media? The degree to which it is done. The politainer represents the complete saturation of politics by media and marketing.

Thus, to understand contemporary politics, you must first recognize that politics is now politainment and all of its personalities merely politainers.

A second concept to understand about contemporary politics is that it is a business. The day of politics and political campaigns being run by dedicated volunteers is an artifact of a Norman Rockwell era. When I came of political age, so much of politics was about knocking on doors, phoning people, and politicking face to face. Now campaigns are run by professionals. Individuals specialize in managing campaigns and candidates, doing polling, fund-raising, and performing many of the tasks that once were done by dedicated volunteers. Yes, many campaigns still have volunteers performing many duties—especially in local and small-town races—but even there, professionals and organizations are increasingly employed to shape a campaign.

For campaigns to be successful, they need to be run like a business and have a business plan. Think of Obama in 2012. His goal is reelection. To do that, his campaign needs to sell the candidate not only to the voters, but to donors. Estimates are he will raise nearly $1 billion for that purpose. That money will be expended on various functions—often and mostly on media advertising—to sell the candidate to the public. The selling of Obama entails the coordination of staff and offices across 50 states, fund-raising, defining and managing a media campaign, setting up a Facebook page, and making individual appearances.
In short, a major production involving advertising and personal appearances is necessary to sell Obama.

If politics is a business, then candidates are merely one participant or part in a broader company. Electing a candidate, a party, or pushing a cause is the product to be sold to the public. If candidates are commodities, then it is clear that any candidate who manages her own campaign has a fool for a client. From my years of experience running and observing campaigns, one thing is clear: too many campaigns have collapsed or fallen apart when candidates seek to run their own show. According to interviews with former staffers, this is what happened with Michele Bachman in her 2012 presidential campaign. She was unwilling to defer to her staff to manage and direct her presidential campaign. Few candidates have the introspection, management skills, and understanding of the business of politics to run their own enterprise. Instead, they need to understand that they are a product to be sold by a business that should be managed by their staff.

If politics is a business in a politainment world, what does it take to be successful?

Winning politics is simple. There are some basic rules that all candidates, parties, and political organizations need to follow if they want to be successful in American politics. After having observed and taught American politics, campaigns and elections, and election law for more than 25 years and also having successfully worked on many political campaigns, I have distilled the basic rules of politics down to ten simple ideas or concepts. These rules of politics guide how I think about American politics. As proof of their efficacy, I have called every presidential election and most national elections correctly for the last 20 years, and the media constantly calls upon me for political analysis.

I developed these rules in 2008 when the State Department asked me to cover the Republican National Convention and speak to foreign reporters, and then to travel Europe to explain how our political system operates. Over the
years I have given hundreds of talks to community groups and reporters, describing and employing these rules as a framework to help people make sense out of politics. These are not rules just for Republicans or Democrats—they describe what any party or politician must do to be successful.

I wrote this book in the middle of the 2012 Republican primaries, while the nominee was still in doubt. It comes after Rick Santorum won a squeaker in Iowa, Mitt Romney was the expected winner in New Hampshire, and Newt Gingrich prevailed in South Carolina, revealing a party divided into an evangelical Midwest, a business Northeast, and a racially divided South. All three represent distinct bases of the Republican Party that need to be knitted together to form a winning coalition that needs to rally around one candidate while also preventing Ron Paul from taking his bat and ball and running as a third-party candidate.

Regardless of whom the eventual nominee is and the outcome of the 2012 elections, these rules provide a blueprint or road map to the White House, explaining what it takes to run a successful campaign in a politainment world.
The Ten Rules in a Nutshell

Rule 1: *Politics is like selling beer*—Politics is about telling a story.

Rule 2: *Annie’s right*—Politics is always about tomorrow.

Rule 3: *Rod Stewart is right*—Politics is about passion.

Rule 4: *Politics is about mobilizing your base*—Politics is also about demobilizing the opposition.

Rule 5: *It’s a bar fight*—Politics is about winning over the swing voter.

Rule 6: *Woody Allen was right*—Politics is about who shows up (90% of life is showing up).

Rule 7: *Image is everything*—Politics is about defining or being defined.

Rule 8: *The multimedia is the message*—Politics is about using the best new technologies to communicate a message.

Rule 9: *Be true to yourself*—Politics is about being who you are and being a clown (be real and laugh at yourself).

Rule 10: *Show me the money*—Politics is a business.
Rule 1
Politics Is Like Selling Beer
(Politics is about telling a story.)

Politics is about the power of telling a compelling narrative about yourself, why you are running for office, what you hope to accomplish, and what you think the world looks like. It is your vision of yourself and the world that you seek to sell to others.

Think about how we persuade others to do things. It is all about story telling. In the world of advertising and marketing, the key to sales is telling a powerful and compelling story. Phyllis Robinson was a legendary advertising copywriter. In penning her obituary Phil Davison, writing in the Financial Times (January 22–23, 2011, p. 10), said of her that she was “The first lady of Madison Avenue’s creative revolution. . . . Robinson became known for the conversational tone of her copy and her ability to tell a story, not just in print but in one-minute television or cinema advertisements.”

Great advertising tells a great story. The story tells you about a product, such as a car, and how driving it can make you look cool, desirable, rich, or some other image. Owning a specific car, wearing Nike shoes, drinking Coke. It’s all about image. But the image is what advertising sells, and it does that by telling a story about how you will look or who you are when you consume their product.

Now think about fund-raising for nonprofits. Think about all of those letters and solicitations you receive in the mail from worthy nonprofits. They tell a story about themselves, the child or animal they helped, the disease they want to cure, the cause they want to advance. Moreover, the best fund-raisers will tell a story about their organization and seek to get a donor to picture herself as part of the story. “Wouldn’t you like to be in
on helping to feed a child or finding a cure for cancer?” Stories are powerful tools to raise money.

Stories are powerful because they personalize a cause or issue. The best stories are personal, perhaps they tell a story of good versus evil, and they are simple. The stories are far more interesting to listen to than straight facts. Few of us are moved by basic facts. David Hume, a famous 17th-century philosopher, was the first to recognize this. We are more likely to change our minds or make decisions based on stories because they appeal to our heart and emotions and not our brain. We all might want to think we are moved by facts, but the reality is that tugging at the heartstrings is more effective in convincing others than is citing facts, figures, and numbers.

Michael Jones and Mark McBeth, in “A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to be Wrong?” (Policy Studies Journal 38(2), 2010: 329–353) and Elizabeth A. Shanahan, Michael D. Jones, and Mark K. McBeth in “Policy Narratives and Policy Process” (Policy Studies Journal 39(3) 2011: 535–561) explain the importance of narratives. The latter state: “Narratives are a way of structuring and communicating our understanding of the world” (p. 539). Stories become ways to convince; they organize our world. They provide a way to give meaning to a confusing world and direct us how to see it. Stories thus become our gateway to the world and how we think about. Narratives are critical to telling us how people process information.

Everyone loves a good story or narrative. We all love a good movie, television show, joke, and perhaps a book if it has a good plot and story.

Politics is no different. To be successful in politics, candidates need a narrative. At its most basic, the narrative needs to accomplish a single task—explain why a person is running for office. Candidates for office need to complete, in 25 words or less, this sentence: “I am running for office because . . . .” A candidate who cannot clearly and simply complete this sentence is doomed from the start.
I remember once asking a candidate for city council why he wanted the job. I asked him to explain to me why he was running and why he wanted to be a council member. He looked at me, cleared his throat, hemmed, hawed, and then asked me to repeat the question. I asked again, and he still could not find an answer. Luckily for him, he was running unopposed.

But for most candidates, simply explaining why they are running for office is not enough. A good political narrative has several components: (1) it explains why the candidate is running for us; (2) it is a narrative describing who the candidate is; (3) it must describe the candidate’s vision of the world; and (4) it must describe what the candidate wants to accomplish if elected—it is their platform.

Narratives are important. Back in 1988, George Herbert Walker Bush cast off the importance of narratives by stating that he did not need the “vision thing” to get reelected. He may not have had an explicit vision, but he certainly had a narrative. He had a narrative about winning the Cold War, creating a kinder and gentler society; one guided by a thousand points of light. Bush successfully convinced many Americans about a way to think about the world and him; they believed that by voting for him, they would get a particular type of government that would secure a specific view of the world without new taxes. Unfortunately for him, he did raise taxes. His story turned out to be a lie for some, and he lost in 1992 to Bill Clinton.

Over time, dueling candidates or parties have consistently offered contrasting narratives. The party or candidate offering the better narrative generally is the one who gets elected. The best examples of recent narratives can be found in the 2010 and 2010 American elections. Barack Obama and John McCain offered compelling and different narratives about themselves and the world. Start with McCain. One way I describe McCain’s narrative is to use a YouTube video. It is the famous speech that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain gave in 1938 after ceding parts of Czechoslovakia to Hitler and the Nazis.
Here Chamberlain promises “peace in our time.” This is a great video.

For a generation that includes McCain, the video is about what we get when we try to appease dictators—we get war. McCain’s narrative was that of a prisoner of war, a war hero. He emphasized that the world is a dangerous place. He told us the lesson of WWII is that safety is maintained with a strong military presence. McCain described the world in 2008 as being filled with terrorism and threats and said that he, a soldier, would keep us safe. The message or narrative of WWII was that military strength would protect us. Similarly, the message or narrative of Vietnam was that we did not use enough military strength; if we had, the world would have been different. McCain’s narrative, in part, was that of the military hero to keep us safe in a dangerous world.

Now think of Obama’s narrative. Again it starts with a YouTube video. It is the famous video of helicopters hovering over the U.S. embassy in Saigon in 1975 as the country is escaping or running away from a war it lost.

The lesson of Vietnam is that U.S. military power has limits, that we cannot subdue all others, and that we need to change the way we think about the world and our role in it. The heart of Obama’s narrative was simple—“change.”

Change is a powerful narrative. Gerald Pomper, one of my former political science professors at Rutgers University, once pointed out that Obama’s use of change as a slogan was similar to those of Eisenhower and Kennedy. Change seems to be the narrative to use when wanting to out incumbents or when voters are weary of the status quo.

Obama and the Democrats promised change, and that drove them to power. But change had many meanings, and that was the brilliance. Part of the narrative of change was also generational. Obama was Pepsi to Coke—he was the voice of Gen X compared to McCain, who represented an older
generation. Obama was cool, hip; he had a Blackberry, he sent
tweets, and he was on Facebook.

But the contrasts between the McCain and Obama
narratives went still deeper. McCain faced a dilemma. Public
opinion polls demonstrated a fatigue with an unpopular war, an
unpopular president, and a sinking, stinking economy. The
Republicans were the party in power, but the public wanted them
out. People wanted change. How was McCain going to deal with
this fact? He tried a couple of brilliant moves that in the end
failed.

One tactic was trying to bank on his image as a
maverick. Americans love the image of the maverick; of the
cowboy who rides off into the sunset. It stands for rugged
individualism and bucking the establishment. It is a uniquely
American value.

In 2008, the U.S. State Department asked me to explain
American politics to foreign journalists attending the Republican
National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. At one point in the
discussion, a reporter from South Korea asked me why being a
maverick was so compelling politically in the USA. I did my
best to explain, but finally the reporter told me that a translation
issue was involved. The only word that maverick translates into
in Korean is traitor, and somehow telling her readers that
McCain was popular because he was a traitor would not do. She
also said that in a more collective society such as Korea, people
would not understand the idea of being a maverick. I also had a
conversation with a German reporter, who asked why being a
war hero was so politically compelling in the USA. With a
twinkle in his eye, he reminded me that in Germany they cannot
run war heroes for office. Good point.

McCain used his maverick status as one way to set
himself apart from the rest of the GOP and an unpopular George
Bush. But there was an even more compelling way. On the night
McCain was to accept the party nomination, a video was shown
at the RNC right before he spoke. It was a video about Reagan.
The video then cut directly to McCain. The transition was a thing
of beauty. McCain also spoke of wanting change and said that he too was unhappy with what was happening in Washington. He wanted change—change to take us back to the values of Ronald Reagan—thus making the connection between himself and Reagan. In this way, McCain tried to appropriate the mantra of change that Reagan once represented.

Obama and McCain offered dual visions of change. One was a change back to the Reagan era; the other was a change away from that era. McCain’s narrative was powerful; it along with the military message might have worked in 2000, but it did not work in 2008. So many who would have identified with his message of 2008 had died since 2000. Tom Brokaw’s greatest generation was rapidly dying off and a new generation was taking over, its members not awestruck by Reagan and the message that McCain delivered. It was a generational shift. One important rule of communication is to know your audience—McCain’s was dying out, and he spoke to a group waning in influence while Obama spoke to a new generation.

Generationally, the narratives of McCain versus Obama came out in other ways. McCain was 72, Obama 47. They were two different generations, but they also represented different worlds. One is about technology and connecting to everyday Americans. Recall in 1992 when George Bush was running for reelection. Two events doomed him. First there was his visit to a grocery store, where he appeared surprised and amazed by a scanning device for reading prices on bar codes. It seemed as if it was the first time he had seen one. Don’t get out of the White House too often, George? The other event took place at the second presidential debate when he looked at his watch. Have someplace better to be, George? In both cases, he looked out of touch with America. McCain had a similar problem in 2008.

At one point McCain remarked that he had never sent an e-mail or worked at a PC. The story was devastating. Not long after he made that statement, my wife and I were visiting her cousin Ruby in Florida. As we were talking one day, Ruby turned to me and said, “You know, McCain, he’s old!”
I turned to Ruby and said, “But you’re 86. You are older than he is—what do you mean?” She said he was old because he didn’t use a computer or send e-mail. Ruby, like lots of Americans, including older ones, uses PCs, Macs, and sends e-mails to her friends and grandkids. In saying McCain was old, Ruby was not simply commenting about his age—she was saying that he was out of sync with Americans who lived and experienced these new technologies.

The generational narrative of 2008 about change, then, captured age, technology, being cool, and being connected to Americans. Obama and the Democrats had a great narrative, but then 2010 happened. In a year where the economy still stunk, how did Obama defend his stimulus bill, financial reform, and health care changes? The situation was clear: they had no good narrative. I could not find a single compelling narrative for the Democrats in 2010 to defend what they had done.

But then a new narrative emerged—“It could have been worse (had we not acted).” This narrative grew out of comments from Obama and Tim Geithner, who talked about all the things they had done, such as bailing out the banks, GM, and so on. Had these steps not been taken, said Obama and Geithner, things would have been worse. I do not know about you, but for me “It could have been worse” hardly inspires voters or wins over swing voters. Still, that was their narrative.

Another narrative was also simple but not compelling: “They’re nuts.” This narrative referred to the emerging Tea Party. However, it too did not work well. First, it presupposed that Americans knew about the Tea Party. By around election time, about 40% of the electorate had no idea who or what the Tea Party was.

Second, the narrative presupposed the Democrats had the ability to message and deliver this narrative. Fat chance! As one of my election law students said in 2010 when someone asked why Democrats did not get their message out, he said simply, “They suck at messaging.” Enough said.

Third, even if Democrats could deliver the message that
the Tea Party and its candidates were nuts, it presupposed that they were able to support that narrative in a credible way. That was not so easy. But in some cases—for example, Christine O’Donnell, the Republican Party Senate candidate in Delaware—it was not so difficult, given O’Donnell’s commercial denying rumors that she was a witch. It is not hard to call someone nuts when she has to squash witch rumors. It would be interesting to find out if in the end O’Donnell carried the Wicca vote.

Finally, even using fear or calling someone nuts does not always work politically. Think back to 1980. Carter ran for reelection against Reagan. Carter and the Democrats tried to cast Reagan as a nut—he would blow up the world or take us into WWIII. However, while fear is often an effective advertising and messaging tool, sometimes disgust with the status quo is stronger. This is what happened in 1980. It was the narrative of change from a status quo no one liked compared to a fear that someone was nuts. In the end, disgust and anger won over fear. Change won.

That is exactly what happened in 2010. For the Republicans, their narrative was also simple—“change.” They appropriated the Democratic narrative and used it against them. It was brilliant. Already in 2012, the same thing is happening. The Republicans are again using change as their mantra. It is Jimmy Carter (aka Obama) versus change. What is the narrative for Obama?

As early as February 16, 2010, a Financial Times headline pointed out the concern with a missing narrative, stating: “Former aide urges Obama to regain ‘political narrative.’” Amitai Etzioni, a famous sociologist, wrote in “Needed: A Progressive Story” that “Instead of an endless platform of policy ideas, Progressives needs to create a shared narrative” (The Nation, May 24, 2010). What Etzioni recognized back then is the same issue today—Obama and the Democrats need a new narrative to counteract the one of change that the Republicans are using along with the narratives of limited
government, government is bad, and we need tax cuts.

Occupy Wall Street may be bailing Obama out. Its message of the “Other 99%” is one about the problem of class in America. It points to the inequalities in this country and to the inequities of bailing out banks but not people. Obama is adopting this narrative. He began doing that with the September 2011 speech to Congress outlining a $450-billion jobs bill. He successfully used that rhetoric in pushing through the payroll tax cut at the end of 2011. He was able to outmaneuver the House Republicans to make them look like they were anti-jobs and people. The emerging rhetoric of Obama in 2012? “I am on your side.” His narrative will be to exploit the anger about the economy and position himself as an economic populist. This may help him with his liberal base, and it certainly will not hurt with the swing voters he needs to win over.

In a world of politainment, where entertainment and politics have merged and the latter is a business, candidates as commodities need a compelling narrative if they are to be sold.
Rule 2
Annie Is Right
(Politics is always about tomorrow.)

Who’s Annie? She is the little orphan in the famous musical named after her. In that musical, the most famous song she sings is *Tomorrow.*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yop62wQH498

The song is one of optimism and hope and also a lot of kitsch. But the point is that the song speaks to the belief that tomorrow will be better than today. It is the great line *From Gone with the Wind;* after the North has devastated the South during the Civil War, Scarlet O’Hara exclaims that “Tomorrow is another day.”

Central to the American psyche is hope for tomorrow and that things will be better over the next horizon. The trek of Puritans and Pilgrims to America to find the “last great hope” for the world, or the “shining city on the hill,” speaks to this. So do the journeys of other immigrants—both legal and illegal—who see America’s future as better. The story of Horace Greeley encouraging us to “Go west, young man,” the Okies of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath,* and the pioneers of Francis Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* also capture the American optimism that somewhere tomorrow it will be better.

How does this connect to politics? Not only do you have to have a narrative to be successful in politics, but it has to be an optimistic one about the future. Americans want to hope that tomorrow will be better than today. No matter how cloudy or dark, we want to believe that our lives will be better tomorrow than they are today. We hope that life will be better for our children. We hope that we will be richer, have a better job, live in a bigger house, or drive a better car in the future. It is this optimism that fuels our propensity to buy lottery tickets or to
cheer for losing sports teams while stating, “Wait till next year.”

The essence of a great political narrative is that it must be optimistic and upbeat. It must appeal to and capture the sense of hope that all Americans have. In the darkest days of the Depression, President Roosevelt lifted Americans by saying, “All that we have to fear is fear itself.” Repeatedly throughout recessions, wars, and even terrorist attacks, presidents and presidential candidates spoke of better days ahead. They reminded us that despite challenges from around the world, the American Century that Henry Luce declared after World War II had not ended, that the United States remained the greatest country in the world, and that its better days were still ahead of us.

Thus narratives are essential to political success, but great political narratives also contain two additional characteristics. First, they are optimistic and hopeful. Second, they are about the future and not the past. In order then, a narrative beats no narrative. Appeals to the future beat appeals to the past. Positive beats negative. Great narratives are positive and appeal to the future.

Two of the greatest narratives were by Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama was a close third. In 1984 Reagan was coming off a first term of his presidency, during which America experienced the worst recession (up till then) since the Depression: unemployment exceeded 10%. The economy had begun to grow, but unemployment was still high. How to respond? Reagan had a brilliant ad entitled “Morning in America.” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwSY

The ad featured everyday people going off to work and preparing themselves for another day. It was genius. It was all about tomorrow and how it was a new day. Yes, we had taken some hits, but now we were going back to work and things could only get better. The ad was upbeat, optimistic, and hopeful.

Reagan had another narrative that was about the future, but in a strange way. He used it in 1980 when he was challenging Jimmy Carter. At the close of one of the presidential
debates, Reagan turned to the camera and asked Americans, “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?”

It was a killer line that destroyed Carter. It forced Americans to ask if their life was better off as a result of Carter being president. Few could say yes, and so this question associated pessimism and the past with Carter and hope and future with Reagan.

Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign for president too had a hit narrative, literally. At the close of the 1992 Democratic Convention—amid balloons and red, white, and blue—attendees and viewers heard the Fleetwood Mac song *Don’t Stop Thinking about Tomorrow*.

The song was a great narrative about the campaign and Clinton—it looked to the future, it hinted at the generational gap between George Bush (a member of the greatest generation) and Bill Clinton (the first baby boomer president), and it captured the sense of hope the latter sought to convey. It was also a great narrative that linked itself to a popular rock culture icon. Finally, it had a great beat that we could dance to! Combine that song with the biography of Clinton—born in Hope, Arkansas—and you get a winner of a narrative.

The third great narrative was Obama’s in 2008. The mantra of “change” was powerful. It was about the future, about a new generation taking power; it was about the belief that we could make a difference. Or, as Obama stated, it was about change we could believe in. Obama’s appeal to change was more powerful than McCain’s because the latter was a demand for change that looked backward. It was a demand for change back to the Reagan era as opposed to change away from and looking beyond the Reagan era. McCain sought to appropriate the Reagan brand one more time, and in one more election, for the Republicans. It failed. The brand appeared to end because the future (narrative) almost always wins over a narrative that appeals to the past. Similarly, in 2008, Hilary Clinton’s narrative
appealed to the good times back in the 1990s under her husband’s presidency. Her narrative, by appealing to the past, lost to an Obama narrative that looked forward.

The Reagan brand was powerful and successful from 1976 to 2004. In every presidential election between those dates, a Bush or a Dole was on every presidential ticket. The common theme for all of those elections was an appeal to Reaganesque themes of smaller government, lower taxes, and returning power to the people and states. Republicans won five of those eight elections. The 2008 presidential election was the first election in nearly 30 years that had no Bush or Dole on the Republican presidential ticket (it was McCain and Palin), and try as they might to reinvent and expand the Reagan brand in one more election, it failed.

McCain’s loss created a tragedy for the Republican Party in that the Reagan brand and narrative appeared to have run its course after three decades, forcing the GOP to rethink its message. Part of that message was found in the remaking of the party in a new image—that of Sarah Palin and the Tea Party. But the party did that by continuing to echo the language of Reagan. The 2012 Republican candidates for president all have sought to invoke the Reagan narrative, even though in so many ways the current GOP is more conservative and different from the Republican Party of Reagan.

Think about it. I was born in 1958, when Eisenhower was president, and he represented one type of Republicanism that dueled with Rockefeller for the soul of the party. Barry Goldwater’s 1964 nomination represented a different type of Republicanism that dueled with Rockefellerism until Reagan was elected. Reaganism was successful until 2008, when it lost. Many, such as Sarah Palin, viewed Reaganites as too willing to compromise with Democrats. Reaganism lost nerve and principle, and it needed to complete what he started but did not finish. The new Republicanism’s roots go back to Barry Goldwater, and its advocates are guided by religious fundamentalism, constitutional originalism, and political purism.
This is Tea Party Republicanism—the party of Michelle Bachmann in Minnesota and Sarah Palin nationally. This is the brand and narrative of contemporary Republicanism—Reagan in name, but something else in reality. This is the version of Republicanism that was elected in 2010. It pushed the debt deal debate to its limit in August 2011, and reluctantly agreed to the payroll tax extension in December 2011.

If Reagan, Clinton, and Obama had great narratives, are there examples of bad ones? Two stand out. The first took place in 1984: when Walter Mondale was debating Ronald Reagan, he turned to the former and to the American public and stated, “Let’s tell the truth. It must be done, it must be done. Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won’t tell you. I just did.” Truth was great, but it was a losing statement. It was not a loser so much because it was true, but because Mondale came across as sour and dark. There was no optimism or hope in the way he spoke and presented himself. The future looked scary under him as the president who would make life more taxing and difficult for us. No wonder he lost.

The second example of a bad narrative was that of former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty when he declared his candidacy for president in 2011. As Pawlenty sought to find a narrative for his campaign, he tried many, including that he was a Sam’s Club Republican. None of them worked. Pawlenty had no buzz and no originality. Pawlenty was a “me too” candidate. Others talk about tax cuts, social conservatism, or what have you, and Pawlenty does the same. Palin does a book, Pawlenty does a book. Romney touts his skills as a pro-business governor, Pawlenty touts his skills as a pro-business governor. Pawlenty was always behind others, never able to find a message or theme that let him stand out from the crowd. Instead, he seemed to be a candidate in search of a message, a voice, an appeal. He stood below undecideds among GOPers. But then Pawlenty tried a different tactic—Dr. No.

On May 23, 2011, Pawlenty traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, to declare his presidential candidacy. Pawlenty’s
presidential announcement was poor. First think of the visuals. Television is visual, and you want to avoid talking heads. Pawlenty chose the Iowa state capitol as a backdrop; but when viewing his speech, I could see only trees and grass behind him. No capitol, no flags, no people. It looked like he was standing in the park, speaking to a small group, running for dog catcher. The event did not look presidential, it looked amateurish. There were no interesting visuals or spark to light up the talk. Contrast this to an Obama or Bachmann event—the camera would have shown them surrounded by cheering crowds. For Pawlenty, the applause sounded like Tiger Woods sinking a shot for par 3.

Now look at the message and delivery. Pawlenty had been a candidate in search of a narrative or message ever since he commenced his presidential bid. He sought to define himself as the “Sam’s Club Republican,” as the tax cutter, and as a social conservative. He appeared to want to be a prophet, telling the American public the truth. Pawlenty uttered the word *truth* 16 times, aiming to be the straight-talking Harry Truman of his generation, telling folks not what they want to hear but what they need to hear. At the same time, he sought to copy a well-trod path of running against Washington D.C., using the Obama “change” mantra from ’08 that also worked successfully for the GOP in 2010. *Truth* for Pawlenty in 2012 was his version of “change.

Yet the narrative did not work. Obama’s narrative was positive, forward, and self-defining. Pawlenty’s was not. It was dark and depressing. Pawlenty needed a speech that defined who he was and what America would look like under his presidency. The message was dark and pessimistic—one of cuts and sacrifice. It reminded me of Walter Mondale in 1984 saying he was going to tell the truth when running against Reagan. It did not work. The message was also dark like Jimmy Carter’s July 15, 1979, “Crisis of American Character” speech; even if true, it was not inspiring.
Overall, what Reagan, Clinton, and Obama remembered and what Mondale and Pawlenty forgot was that Annie is correct—it is always about tomorrow.
Rule 3
Rod Stewart Is Right
(Politics is about passion.)

Hear it on the radio (Passion)
Read it in the paper (Passion)
Hear it in the churches (Passion)
See it in the schoolyard (Passion)
—“Passion,” by Rod Stewart

In 1980 rock musician Red Stewart had a number one hit with the song “Passion.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbWj12YiFRs

Life is about passion, and so is politics.

As Washington Post writer E. J. Dionne once declared (July 12, 2010), “But there is an intangible: Passion counts in politics. It motivates a movement’s most fervent followers but can also carry moderates attracted to those who promise change and profess great certainty about how to achieve it. Barack Obama got himself elected president by understanding this.”

Passion is the key. In 2008 people were passionate about Obama. Passion is what drives people to the ballot, to volunteer, to give. It is the buzz factor. Many candidates are competent, but no one feels passionate about them. Mitt Romney lacks passion, much like a previous Massachusetts governor—Michael Dukakis—who ran for president as a competent technocrat. He lost. He had no charisma and inspired no passion. No one seems really passionate about Romney, thus explaining many of his problems in sealing the deal to secure the GOP nomination and win over many to his side. As I have stated several times, Romney (at least for women) reminds them of their first husband. Conversely, at various times supporters of Bachmann, Perry, and Cain were passionate about them. No question that Ron Paul has passionate supporters.
Passion and charisma are related. Some candidates have a special charisma that inspires others. John F. Kennedy, in truth or legend, is one example; perhaps Ronald Reagan is another. They have the ability, as presidential scholar Richard Neustadt declared in *Presidential Power*, to persuade others. The essence of presidential power is the power to persuade. One cannot simply order others around—one has to be persuasive and convince people to support your ideas. Neustadt’s book opens with an interesting story. When contemplating General Eisenhower winning the presidential election, Harry Truman said, “He’ll sit here, and he’ll say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the Army. He’ll find it very frustrating.” Successful presidential candidates are the same—they have to be able to persuade people to vote for them. But something more is needed. James David Barber wrote about it in his famous book, *The Presidential Character*.

Presidents bring to office their personality, which helps mold their real power to persuade. Successful presidents such as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan inspired passion. Each of them possessed an elusive trait that made their followers excited. This is passion.

Passion may be the trait of a politainer. Obama certainly was one in 2008 in the sense that he became a commodity marketed across many media venues. He was also a rock star. In 2008, I attended two rallies in Minneapolis—one for Hillary Clinton and one for Barack Obama. Clinton’s rally was flat; Obama’s was like a rock concert (held, incidentally, at the Target Center—a frequent forum for real rock concerts). The Obama event was electric; I could feel the passion in his speech, in the crowd, and in all that he did and said. It paid off by driving many voters to the polls and gaining a sweeping victory for him and the Democrats.

Yet the Obama presidency has been devoid of passion. His speeches are mostly flat and uninspiring; they have failed to persuade or inspire. Speeches are long on facts and figures and short on compelling stories and narratives. This lack of passion
hurt Democrats in 2010 at the polls, both because their supporters did not feel it and failed to show up and because Republicans had it and did show up. The result was a reversal of fortunes for the two parties in 2010. The challenge for 2012 is about passion—can Obama get his base, and especially the liberals, to be passionate about him? Will passion deliver the swing voters to him? Conversely, will passion bring Republicans out to vote, especially for Romney, in 2012?

Passion needs to be distinguished from anger. Anger is a passion. We hear a lot about the angry voter, and anger seems to be why Democrats did well in 2006 to take back Congress and why the GOP did so well in 2010 too. In 2009, the Tea Party was birthed from anger and perhaps resentment when Rick Santelli of CNBC stated on February 19: “No they’re not, Joe. They’re not like putty in our hands! This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbors’ mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills? Raise their hand. President Obama, are you listening?” Anger is what drove the Tea Party confrontations against Democrats in town hall meetings in August 2009, and anger seems to be the reason many Tea Party members are upset with Obamacare and the president.

Anger brews demand for political change. The two are related. Anger can be a powerful passion, but it is not the only passion. Patriotism, fear, greed—they too are passions. Some may be more effective than others as political forces at different times in history. But the most important point to realize is that Rod Stewart was correct in saying passion is needed. Without it, political candidates are unsuccessful.
Rule 4
Politics Is about Mobilizing Your Base
(Politics is also about demobilizing the opposition.)

Winning in politics is easy. All you have to do is get more votes than your opponent. It does not matter if the vote total is a landslide or a squeaker. A candidate needs only one more vote than his or her opponents to win an election. Of course the exception to that was the 2000 presidential race, when Al Gore got more than a half-million more votes than George Bush in the popular vote but nonetheless lost to him in the Electoral College. But even there, Gore learned the hard way; he lost Florida by 537 votes and then lost the presidency. Similarly, in Minnesota in 2008, Senator Norman Coleman lost to Al Franken by 312 votes. Every vote does count. To amend a saying we used to utter as youngsters, close only counts with horseshoes, hand grenades, atomic bombs, and elections. All things being equal, a close victory is still a victory.

But how does a person get more votes than anyone else? One part of the answer is that you have to mobilize your base. You need to develop a narrative that excites a passion in your base and then make sure they show up to support you. But all this begs the question, who is your base? There are two answers, depending on whether you are seeking a party nomination or running in the general election.

In a general election, your base should be your political party. In part, the purpose of parties and getting a party nomination is the hope that it will work to get you elected. The party will help mobilize volunteers, find donors, and run get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns. You hope that your party and those who identify with it will be excited and mobilized and that you will capture 100% of their vote on election day. By 100%, of course you mean not just of those who show up to vote but of all
who consider themselves to be your party members. Thus you want to win not just a large percentage of party members to vote for you, you also want depth in terms of support. You want as many of your party as members as possible to support you in the largest percentage possible. Mobilize this base and you are a long way toward winning.

But defining a base is more complicated if you are in a primary. Here you do not automatically have the party supporting you. In fact the purpose of a primary or caucus or a convention is to secure the party nomination. But in battling for the nomination, you are trying to find likely supporters who will become part of your base such that you will be able to win the party endorsement. If you are a Democrat, for example, the base of the party consists of various constituencies including workers and labor unions, minorities, Jewish and Catholic voters, and others such as the elderly and maybe the young. This base is referred to as the New Deal coalition because it was formed by Roosevelt during the 1930s and more or less has remained the core constituency for the Democratic Party since then. For the Republicans, the base of the party is social, religious, and economic conservatives, advocates of smaller national government, business leaders, the wealthy, and (increasingly) members of the Tea party movement. These are the more or less established bases in the two major parties.

In 2008, Obama and Clinton battled over the best way to capture and mobilize different aspects of the base. Obama appealed to the young (under 30)—often unpredictable voters and supporters—as well as people of color and many who are not considered among the more reliable or traditional segments of the party. He appealed to a grassroots effort to mobilize his base, often resorting to new communication technologies such as Twitter and Facebook to reach them. He used these techniques especially well in caucus states to outflank Clinton. She relied on a more top-down approach to win the nomination. She went after party leaders, their endorsements, women, and more traditional groups within the party. Both are good strategies, but in this case
Obama won because he was more successful in mobilizing his base of supporters to show up.

In 2012, the Republican nominees for president are engaged in battles to mobilize their bases. There are several bases—a social conservative or religious one, a business one, a Southern constituency, and a libertarian one. The Iowa Caucus was all about that—each candidate sought to deliver its supporters to the caucus. Santorum won Iowa. He did a slightly better job mobilizing his base better than Romney. Romney lacks a passionate base, and he has done little to extend it. Recall that in 2008, Romney came in second in Iowa with 25%—this is exactly what he won in 2012. It is not that Romney is a stronger candidate today than he was a month ago (let alone four years ago). Instead, the GOP base—especially the social conservatives—are more divided today than they were in ’08. Romney benefitted tremendously from a fractured conservative base.

Think back to 2008. Huckabee wins Iowa with 34%. Add his percentage to Fred Thompson’s 13%, and the social conservatives have 47% of the vote. Now shift to 2012. Romney has 24.6%. Combine that with Santorum (24.7%), Perry (10.3%), and Bachmann (5.0%), and that totals 40%. Yes, the clear social conservatives have a lower percentage; but they are more divided, especially if some of Gingrich’s votes too might come from the social conservatives.

But think also about how Ron Paul went from 10% in 2008 to 21.4% in 2012. He more than doubles his vote. One message from Iowa is how with Romney stuck at 25% in two caucuses, he has failed to win over the more conservative wings of his party. He is in no better shape than before; he just looks better because of a more divided party.

Romney had failed to close the gap with the majority of the GOP base. He has been stuck at 25% in Iowa and across the country for months. He still faces a distrust problem among conservatives, and there is still little passion for him. He is Mr. Inevitable, but that is hardly the basis for a party rallying around
you. Ask Hillary Clinton in 2008 about this. Going forward, Romney needs to win over the conservatives—and that may not be easily done. Look to see rumors or calls for others to enter the race; and with the GOP now running primaries on a proportional and not a winner-take-all basis, candidates like Paul have every incentive to stay in the race, pick up delegates, and prevent a sealing of the deal for Romney.

Santorum took first place in Iowa because he was the latest beneficiary of the “Anybody but Romney” vote. Unlike others such as Bachmann and Perry, who rose and gave the media time for vetting and scrutiny, this did not happen with Santorum. He benefitted from the implosion of other conservatives, the anti-Romney feeling, conservative endorsements, and luck of timing. The challenge for the GOP in 2012 is putting together a coalition or base big enough to win first the nomination and then the general election.

Securing party nominations thus means getting your base mobilized. Primaries and caucuses involve a winnowing process—eliminating those who cannot build a winning base and coalition, and supporting others who actually can do that. It is as if the primary process is two funnels, one expressing the elimination of candidates and the other demonstrating a widening and expansion of a coalition broad enough to win a nomination.

Mobilizing your base is important during the primary season as well as the general election. Candidates cannot not win unless they first secure their base. For the presidential race, the base has both a party and a geographic basis. The party base is obvious—secure the support of your own party. Over time, both the Democrats and Republicans have generally done a good job at this, although the Republicans are better. Michael Lewis-Beck and coauthors, in *The American Voter Revisited*, have examined presidential voting patterns since the 1950s, drawing in part on the classic *The American Voter*, by Angus Campbell et al. These two works demonstrate that Republican voters are less likely to deviate and support Democratic candidates than Democratic
voters are to cross over and support Republicans. Republicans are thus better at holding their base. As we shall see later, when we examine another rule of politics, Republican voters are also more likely to actually show up and vote. This too is an important part of mobilizing the base.

The base is not static for political parties. As noted earlier, the Democratic Party’s base (as well as the Republican Party’s) has more or less remained constant since the New Deal. Yet party composition does change over time. Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham once argued, in his book *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (1970), that American politics and party composition seem to undergo a restructuring once every 30 to 40 years.


These changes are often precipitated by significant economic or social turmoil. These restructurings occur in critical realigning elections that are characterized by unusually higher voter interest and turnout and a shift in normal voting patterns and alignments. As time has shown, the elections of 1800 (Thomas Jefferson), 1828 (Andrew Jackson), 1860 (Abraham Lincoln), 1896 (William McKinley), and 1932 (Franklin Roosevelt) were critical realigning elections that resulted in the redefinition of the major political parties, who supports them (the base), and which party emerges as dominant in American politics.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realigning_election#Realigning_elections_in_United_States_history

Political scientists point to the 1932 election as the last major critical reelection in American politics. The Democratic and Republican parties were more or less defined by the coalitions that formed back then. However, a quick calculation suggests that a realigning election should have taken place sometime in the 1970s and then again more recently. While there
is no consensus on which elections since 1932 have been identified as fitting the bill, there are two potential candidates.

Some point to the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as bearing many characteristics of a critical election. He was successful in moving many so-called Reagan Democrats—blue-collar whites—over into the GOP column. They still identify themselves as Democrats but vote Republican in many cases. Additionally, social issues such as abortion, gay rights, and even civil rights have moved some voters (especially evangelical Christians, Catholics, and Southern whites) out of the Democratic fold and over to the Republican Party. Moreover, decline in unionization and Democratic Party support for a Palestinian state have resulted in some Jewish voters defecting to the Republican Party. Thus, Reagan’s 1980 election has weakened the New Deal alignment since 1980, perhaps constituting a partial realignment of the parties.

But the second potential critical election and realignment was Barack Obama’s in 2008. He won states—such as Indiana, Virginia, and North Carolina—that Democrats had not won in decades, and there was evidence that many whites and evangelicals voted for him. Many thought that his election changed the political alignment of the country again. Yet, as was seen in 2010 when Democrats suffered major losses, predictions of realignment may have been premature. But the point here is that identifying the base for the parties is somewhat in question because some voters seem up for grabs in 2012.

The concepts of realignment and critical elections also suggest that presidential races involve a geographic component. Conventional political folk wisdom talks of red (Republican) and blue (Democratic) states. These are states that tend to favor one particular party over another. The media image is of states uniformly red or blue, but the reality is that most are more polka dotted. Within states, urban areas and inner-ring suburbs tend to be Democratic and outer-ring suburbs and rural areas Republican. But even with this pattern, some states are reliably leaning to one party or another. A Democrat is unlikely to win
the presidential vote in Texas, and a Republican is unlikely to do so in New York. Given the structure of the Electoral College, where all states but Maine and Nebraska award all of their electoral votes based on a winner-take-all basis to the person who wins the plurality of the popular vote, some states just are near givens to support one candidate. To be a Democrat in Texas, according to some, means that your vote for the president is a waste since your vote will not really matter when it comes to electing a president.

Thus there are red and blue states, but there are also purple states. These are the states that swing either Democrat or Republican. They are the true battleground states. According to Larry Sabato, for the most part the 2012 election is over in 43 states. He contends:

Republicans therefore are a lock or lead in 24 states for 206 electoral votes, and Democrats have or lead in 19 states for 247 electoral votes. That’s why seven super-swing states with 85 electors will determine which party gets to the magic number of 270 electoral votes: Colorado (9), Florida (29), Iowa (6), Nevada (6), New Hampshire (4), Ohio (18) and Virginia (13).

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014240531903918104576504520213848188.html

The presidential election in 2012 hinges simply on seven or so states. This statement of course assumes that the two major parties mobilize their bases. And that may happen, all things being equal. But what happens if one side does not mobilize its base? This is always the hope of the opposition. Hope that the candidate on the other side lacks passion, or that her party is not passionate. If either of these things occur and you can mobilize your base, then that dramatically helps your side win. This is what happened in 2006 and 2008 when Democrats mobilized their bases and won while the GOP was not mobilized. The
reverse happened in 2010. Now, in 2012, the issue is again about mobilizing the base, and both sides are doing their best to bring their people out. The worry is that the Democrats will not be passionate about Obama and stay home. Or that the GOP will not rally around a Romney-type character and lose an election they have a chance to win.

But rallying a base and hoping the other side does not is more than just hope. There is a strategy here. Steven Schier’s *By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusive Politics in the United States* describes a new trend in American politics—the politics of demobilization.

In the process of doing your best to mobilize your base, you also want to do your best to demobilize or discourage the opposition from voting. If there is a way to discourage others who will not support you from voting, then that moves you even further along toward winning an election. How is that possible?

Mobilization and demobilization take place along two dimensions—ground war and air war. Ground war involves grassroots activity to get the vote out. It is knocking on doors, making phone calls, scheduling candidate personal appearances, and other activities that are part of a more traditional, face-to-face way to get out the vote. Air war involves political advertising—perhaps even new and social media tools—to reach different populations.

Political advertising typically uses four types of ads. The first is simply an introductory ad. As its name implies, this ad introduces a candidate to the public. One example is to look at Amy Klobuchar’s 2006 Senate campaign. Her first ad was simply a bio describing who she was. It was good.

But her second ad, entitled “Guaranteed,” was genius.
spend an additional night in a hospital after giving birth. Why was the ad so great? This is a question men ask when I give talks. I would respond by saying the ad was not speaking to you, but to women instead. It was an ad meant to resonate with female voters, and it did. In her victory over Congressman Mark Kennedy, Klobuchar netted nearly 63% of the female vote in the state. The ad aimed at securing and mobilizing her base, and it succeeded.

A third type of ad is a contrast one. It seeks to distinguish one candidate from another on some issues. A good example of such an ad is one aired in 2008 by John McCain, in which he contrasts himself to Barack Obama on a range of issues regarding taxes, business, and economic growth. http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2008/10/mccain_ad_compa.html

The ad is critical of Obama in the sense of stating disagreement with his views, and it does that by way of contrast to McCain. A contrast ad is effective in clarifying candidate positions. These ads can be negative—criticizing an opponent’s positions—but such criticism is legitimate.

But the fourth type of ad, referred to as the attack ad, has become most prominent. Attack ads distort the truth or facts, often in ways that assault the character of an opponent. These ads have received significant attention and criticism in recent years. These ads may also play on fear and uncertainty. As I wrote in my *Lights, Camera, Campaign! Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*:

> [P]olitical ads are a ubiquitous presence in campaigns [and] lies in the fact that they stand out and are remembered by viewers as citizens as surely as are ads by car companies, hamburger joints, and beer companies. Among the classics there is the famous “Daisy” ad from the 1964 presidential race where President Johnson had a little girl counting flower petals,
only to have the commercial fade to a nuclear bomb detonation.

This ad successfully used the fear of war to dissuade voters from voting for Barry Goldwater. In 1984, President Reagan’s “Bear in the Woods” ad exploited fear of the Soviet Union,

while his “Morning in America” depicted an optimistic American looking towards the future. In 1988 the “Willie Horton” ad exploited fear of crime and racism to depict Democrat Michael Dukakis as weak on crime,

and more recently, ads in the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary by a friend of George Bush derailed John McCain’s campaign. These are just some of the ads that have been considered as memorable uses of television to craft images and affect voter perceptions.

More recently, a pro-Romney super PAC, “Restore Our Future,” ran attack ads against Newt Gingrich in Iowa. The ads were effective in damaging Gingrich and knocking him out of the front-runner position in that state in 2012.

Why run attack ads? The simple answer is that they work. But how? Some political scientists, such as Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar argue in Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink & Polarize the Electorate, that attack ads seek to do a couple of things.
First, the ads aim to demonize the opposition. They do so to draw a contrast between good and evil and get your base all hot and bothered, and therefore mobilized. Second, attack ads aim to dispirit the opposition to the point that they do not vote. But the reality often is that both sides and their surrogates go negative, to some extent offsetting the demobilization impact on both sides.

However, the other thing the ads do is suppress voters—especially swing voters—who may say a pox on one or both sides and therefore not vote. Ansolabehere and Iyengar contend that attack ads suppress voter turnout by five or so points, although their claims are controversial. This strategy of demobilization seems at the heart of much contemporary politics; some contend that efforts to impose voter photo identification laws are aimed at discouraging some people from voting. Others assert that preventing voter fraud is the basis of these photo efforts. However, as I have argued in two articles, there is little evidence in American politics that in-person voter fraud has affected the outcome of elections.

The point of this discussion is that there is evidence that attack ads work. Their efficacy resides in their ability to help mobilize a base as well as to seek to demobilize those likely to vote against you.
Rule 5
It’s a Bar Fight
(Politics is about winning over the swing voter.)

Colt 45 beer featured famous commercials in the 1970s of a man seated at table waiting to be served while surrounded by commotion. [link](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLL62iJhc88)

I remember these ads because they reminded me of bar fights and politics. I am not the only one who associates the two. E. E. Schattschneider, one of the most astute political scientists in last fifty years, drew a similar comparison in *The Semisovereign People* (1960). [link](http://www.amazon.com/Semi-Sovereign-People-Realists-Democracy-America/dp/B000MQ8N2O/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1326666385&sr=1-2)

First, he noted that bar fights are won or lost depending on who the audience supports. The same is true in politics. In an era when no political party commands a majority, the battle for victory resides in capturing the swing voter. Politics is thus about moving marginals (swing voters). Politics is a bar fight.

Both the Republicans and the Democrats of course will do their best to mobilize their political bases in an effort to win an election. But that is generally not enough. According to a recent Rasmussen Reports poll, 35.4% of the American adult population considers themselves to be Republican while 32.7% consider themselves to be Democrats. [link](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/partisan_trends)

These numbers reflect a historic switch in the post–World War II era, when Democratic affiliation was much greater than for Republicans. Recent Gallup surveys place the ranks of Democrats at 43%, the GOP at 40%.
The Gallup survey seems more consistent with the historic slight edge given to the Democrats. But both surveys highlight the same point—neither party commands 50% or more of the electorate. For Rasmussen, 32% report “no” or “other” for party affiliation; for Gallup, it is 17%.

So neither the Republicans nor the Democrats command a majority of the population as their base. They therefore cannot win elections, as a rule, simply by mobilizing their base. Instead they must win over some swing voters to their side. Real swing voters are those who do shift sides and preferences in voting, as opposed to voters who claim no party affiliation but nonetheless vote consistently for one party or another.

The battle for control of much of American politics, especially at the presidential level, is an effort to capture swing voters to support you. As discussed earlier, presidential politics revolves around swing states. It is also true that in many state and local races, the demographics and district lines for offices make few seats uncompetitive. Some estimates are that in Congress, at best only about 15% or so of seats are truly competitive. But in many races, and at the presidential level, the battle is to move swing voters in a few swing states. Who are these swing voters?

Efforts to define swing voters are often elusive. In his *The Swing Voter in American Politics*, William G. Meyer notes that there is no single type of swing voter. Instead, there are clusters of several types of swing voters. They include suburban soccer moms, many formerly Republican, who have left the party (while their husbands have stayed) because of its stand on many issues. These women care about family issues such as health insurance and education and are more moderate on issues such as abortion and gay rights. Some NASCAR dads also fit into this category. Other swing voters are young people. The list of groups is broad but finite.
In many cases the swing voters are not only politically nonpartisan, but moderate in their political views. In some cases they are highly educated; often they are not always highly motivated to vote and therefore are not always reliable or cannot be counted on to show up. In some cases these voters know about the issues, and they may get their political information from traditional or nontraditional sources. In other cases, they are not politically engaged and not well informed about the issues.

The difficult task for candidates going after swing voters is twofold. First, identifying the demographic they wish to reach given their issues, and second, deciding whether it is better to try to mobilize or demobilize them. If you demobilize them, they will not vote for the opposition. That is good. Seeking to mobilize them to support you is good, but it may be costly to reach them. Also, they may represent niche demographics and therefore be hard to reach or locate. Moreover, once you reach them, you then have to give them reason to vote. Thus swing voters present two hurdles: Locating and reaching them and then getting them to vote for you. These are separate but often intertwined problems.

Who are the most important swing voters in American politics? The simple answer is that it depends on the election. However, some arguments can be made that the soccer mom is still one of the most important swing voters. While Democrats do enjoy a gender gap advantage in terms of getting a greater percentage of women as opposed to men to vote for them in recent elections, this may be due to the Democrats’ greater success in reaching out to them as the Republican Party has moved in a more conservative direction.

http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/voters/gender_gap.php

A tactic critical to presidential success in recent elections has been to watch where the female voters go—if they break in large numbers for the Democrats, then the Democratic candidate is more likely to win.

However, the argument can also be made that other
swing voters, include young people under 30, are important. These are individuals whose turnout is mercurial and not dependable. If the overall turnout rates in America for voting in national elections is approximately 60%, turnout for those under 30 is perhaps 20 or more points lower. Barack Obama was very successful in appealing to them and having them turn out to vote, although again some polls suggest that their turnout in 2008 was not unusually larger.

Finally, swing voters might also potentially include individuals whose politics may not line up neatly with the two major parties. There are pro-choice and pro-gay-rights voters who nonetheless are fiscally conservative. These individuals face dilemmas in partisan voting and may be swing voters.

Whatever the final composition of swing voters, it is simply enough to say that it is a bar fight to win them over. In a presidential election, it might be said that the real battle is to win over swing voters in swing suburbs in swing states. This is actually a pretty small battleground.
Rule 6
Woody Allen Was Right
(Politics is about who shows up; 90% of life is showing up.)

Film director Woody Allen is credited with saying that “90% of life is just showing up.” The same is true in politics. In the end all the passion, grand narratives, and appeals to the base and swings do not matter unless you get people out on to vote on election day, or in advance of it if early voting is possible. This is what truly matters. If your supporters do not actually vote—especially in sufficient numbers—you are not going to win, no matter what.

So the issue appears to be finding a way to ensure that everyone votes. In the United States, you might think everyone entitled to vote would actually do so. But that is not the case. Voter turnout in the United States is far from 100%. In fact, compared to voter turnout in other countries that we might consider to be our peers, turnout is quite low. For example, voter turnout in national elections in from 1945 to 2001 in Australia averaged 94.5%, Austria 91.3%, Iceland 89.5%, Sweden 87.1%, and the United States 66.5%.


Consistently, voter turnout in other major European-style democracies ranges from 70% to 90%. In the United States, turnout for presidential elections is dramatically lower. In fact, in 1996 voter turnout dipped to less than half the adult population—49%.

To put these results into a historical perspective, 63% of the adult population voted in 1960; that number dropped almost steadily until 2004, when it ticked back to 56%. In 2008, the turnout was 57%.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voter_turnout_in_the_United_States_presidential_elections
The United States Census Bureau computes turnout rates differently. It found that in 1996, 54% of the adult population voted; and in 2008, the turnout was 58%. http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/historical/index.html (Table A-10).

However turnout is calculated, the same answer remains—compared to other nations, the United States has dramatically lower turnout rates in national elections. The numbers are even worse for off-year (non-presidential election) elections. In 2010, the turnout rate was approximately 42%. In local elections, the rates can be as low as 10%. http://www.nonprofitvote.org/voter-turnout-2010.html

In addition to overall voting rates, turnout varies by specific populations. Individuals most likely to vote are those who are white, older, better educated, affluent, and religiously conservative. In fact, one of the best predictors of voter turnout is to look at the number of times per week people attend a religious service. Those who are attending a weekly religious service are more likely to vote. More specifically, conservative Protestants have the highest voter turnout rates in the United States when compared to anyone else.

Conversely, young people, people of color, the poor, those with less than a high school degree, and those who are less religiously inclined are less likely to vote. I also did a study once that found that those who were more sexually active were less likely to vote than those not as active, but that is another story! (See “Expose Yourself to Politics,” Texas Observer, July 24, 1992, p. 23.) Historically women were less likely to vote than men, but now they often have slightly higher participation rates than men.

For some of these groups who do not vote, their rates of participation might fall as much as 20 or more points lower than the average. Thus young people, especially in college, have voting rates that are quite low. In 2008, for those aged 18 to 24, the turnout was 44% compared to 65% for those 45 to 60 and 68% for those over 65.
Many explanations have been offered for account for low voter turnout in the United States, especially among some populations. Arguments range from complex voter registration laws to inconvenient voting times and locations to lack of knowledge or interest to inability to get off from work to the simple belief that voters do not like the choices. I do not wish to diagnose the causes of nonvoting here. Instead, I am simply saying that not everyone does in fact show up to vote and that getting voters to the polls poses a challenge for parties and candidates.

All candidates and voters face this challenge, but Democrats are especially affected. This is so because the profile of the average voter—conservative Protestant, white, more affluent, and better educated—tends to be that of a Republican voter. Core GOP voters are more likely to vote than are those supporting Democrats. Thus, even though Democrats enjoy a slight edge in terms of the percentage of the population that identifies with them, their voters are less likely to turn out. The challenge for Democrats, then, is to reach their voters and actually get them to vote.

What complicates this strategy now is that well over one-third of voters vote early and before Election Day. States have increasingly eased absentee voting requirements or made it simpler to vote early, oftentimes several weeks before the actual election day. This situation creates opportunities and challenges for candidates. The opportunity is that if voters can be nailed down for you early, and they then vote, they are like money in the bank; then you can turn your attention to others who have not decided. The challenge is that if you are losing, or your campaign is still gathering momentum and has not yet peaked in terms of getting its narrative out, some individuals may have voted before you have a chance to reach them.

Elections used to be like running a marathon or race, the hope being that you can peak at the end and finish strong. Now,
with early voting across the country, presidential candidates may need to peak at several times—often in advance of election day—and run several mobilization efforts to reach all the various voters at different times.

How do candidates and parties stimulate turnout? Rule 8 below discusses this question more in terms of the communication technologies employed to accomplish that aim. In short, increasing voter turnout is about mobilizing by balancing ground wars and air wars; that is, by direct contact with voters versus media advertising.

As noted earlier, ground wars are the phone calls, door-to-door campaigns, rallies, and candidate appearances to encourage voter excitement and turnout. Ground wars also include what are referred to as grassroots efforts to stimulate voting such as GOTV, voter registration drives, and other efforts to inform voters that there is an election, they have a candidate running, and they want you to vote for her come Election Day. These grassroots efforts might involve quite sophisticated efforts to identify likely voters, offer them rides to polls, assist them with registering to vote, and provide other services to encourage them to vote.

Air wars includes all the different types of advertising designed to inform voters about a pending election and encourage them to vote. Advertising ranges from print (newspapers) to radio, from television to new media such as cable television and the Internet to the social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of communication used to reach a variety of voters and constituencies.

A major task in a political campaign is determining how to allocate political money between spending on ground versus air wars. In local campaigns, it may not make much sense to spend money on television ads, because the television market may be larger than the voting district; therefore, money is being wasted on people who cannot vote for you. But for national campaigns and statewide elections, it makes more sense to do television ads, for example. Thus, air wars to get people to show
up may be more efficient than ground wars; and in general, presidential campaigns do involve a significant amount of national advertising.

One of the authors in a book I edited told a terrific story about balancing air versus ground wars. After the 2000 election a group of students asked Karl Rove, George Bush’s campaign strategist, to comment on what he thought was Al Gore’s best political move. He said it was the boat ride that Gore took down the Mississippi River from southern Minnesota to Iowa and Illinois. Rove said that combining air and ground wars was a great move. Gore’s trip down the river took him into media markets and areas not generally reached by candidates. For days before the trip, local media built excitement about Gore’s arrival. The same occurred while he visited and then again afterward. The trip also gave many voters face time to see Gore. As a result, Gore penetrated areas that might not have voted for him—or at least not in the numbers he received as a result of the trip. The boat ride was a major success.

Why was this boat trip significant? Gore had planned two other boat rides in 2000—down the Suwannee River in Florida and the Ohio River in Ohio—but he canceled them both at the last minute, deciding instead to commit resources elsewhere and focus on air wars. Gore lost both states by slim margins; the loss in Florida was merely 537 votes. Who knows what would have happened had he made that trip?

The broader point of this discussion is that candidates for office face a challenge in actually getting their supporters out to vote for them. People can be lazy, busy, or forgetful. Thus, so much of running a successful campaign is getting your supporters out. That is why Woody Allen is correct; 90% of politics is just showing up.
Rule 7
Image Is Everything
(Politics is about defining or being defined.)

A 1990 Canon camera television ad featured tennis pro Andre Agassi sporting the message, “Image is everything.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpuFEpbE0d0

The ad was hugely successful. Conversely, a 1986 Vicks Formula cough syrup commercial starring actor Peter Bergman from the soap All My Children was famous for opening with him stating that “I am not a doctor, but I play one on television.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYQ0WEdG54A

Both of these commercials dramatized an important point—image is important, and how you appear or are described is often more important than reality. The same is true in politics. Niccolo Machiavelli was a famous 16th-century Italian political thinker whose 1532 book The Prince is considered one of the influential discussions on the art of power and politics. He once argued that leaders often do not need to have certain traits—instead, they merely need to appear to have them.

There are so many expressions in everyday and business and culture about making a good first impression. “You never have a second chance to make a first impression,” or you need to develop your elevator speech; both are classic observations about first impressions and opportunities to message. Candidates face the same dilemma when introducing themselves to voters. They have to make that good first impression—with their narrative—and define who they are to the voters. First impressions matter. We noted earlier how ads such as the one by Amy Klobuchar successfully did that.

Image is everything. Political narratives are defined by you or others. The genius of defining is that each person can set the narrative, frame the issue, or paint the opposition or themselves. A front-runner in a primary who does not win as big as expected is considered a loser, even if she still wins. Someone
doing better than expected in a primary can be considered a winner even if he fails to come in first. Similarly, at least in primaries, winners can look like losers, and vice versa.

Part of the “define or be defined game” is also doing that to your opponent. Set the agenda on the issues, and you force him to argue on your turf. If I take action, I can define who I am before my opponent does. Conversely, if I can define my opponent as unpatriotic, soft on crime, or as a tax-and-spend liberal before she can define herself, then I put her on the defensive. Lyndon Johnson did it brilliantly with the 1964 “Daisy ad” that defined Barry Goldwater as a president who would take us into a nuclear war. George Herbert Walker Bush in 1988 also did it with the Willie Horton campaign that cast Michael Dukakis as soft on crime.

There is a name for this define-or-be-defined strategy: it is swiftboating, and next to this word in the dictionary is a photo of the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. A group called Swiftboat Veterans for Truth ran an effective ad campaign that questioned Senator Kerry’s patriotism.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phqOuEhg9yE
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4Zk9YmED48&feature=related

This group was able to cast Kerry’s receipt of three purple hearts for bravery into a sign of cowardice and un-Americanism. These were definitely negative attack ads, and they were highly effective in raising doubts about Kerry’s character and fitness to be president.

But the power of these ads resided not just in their messages, whose truth was questionable. It also lay in the failure of John Kerry to answer or respond to them. His silence stood in contrast to assertions attacking Bill Clinton in 1992 and claiming he had a sexual relationship with Gennifer Flowers. The Clinton campaign quickly and effectively used the latest technology—a fax machine—to respond to and preempt damage from this story. Kerry instead stood silent in the face of the ads.

Silence may be golden and a smart strategy when
questioned by police regarding allegations that you committed a crime. But it doesn’t work in the corporate world. When in the 1970s packages of adulterated Tylenol were found around the country, the product’s manufacturer Johnson & Johnson did not shy away from the media. The company addressed the crisis with such openness and candor that to this day, the way it handled this crisis is considered the textbook case study on corporate public relations.


In that chapter, Smith and Copeland assert: “The presidential campaign of Senator John Kerry could be used as a study in how not to respond to negative political advertisements.” They argue that the timing and the response to attack ads is critical and that silence as defense to them is not a viable option. Candidates cannot let someone attack early and often and not respond, lest that attack comes to define them. Kerry thus represents the negative example regarding how not to respond to these attack ads. Newt Gingrich also failed to learn this lesson quickly enough in Iowa in 2012, when a pro-Romney organization attacked him and Gingrich opted to take the high road by not responding. He learned his lesson well; by the time the South Carolina primary hit, Newt the Nice was on the attack.

The lesson of all this: You cannot ignore attack ads. And more important, image is everything. If you do not succeed in defining yourself or others, they will succeed in defining you.
Rule 8
The Multimedia Is the Message:
(Politics is about using the best new technologies to communicate a message.)

Media critic Marshall McLuhan is famous for asserting that the “medium is the message.” Artist Andy Warhol declared that everyone gets their “15 minutes of fame.” And Willie Sutton, when asked why he robbed banks, answered, “Because that is where the money is.”

The legacy of these three individuals is about communicating a message. Politics is about telling a story, mobilizing a base, and capturing swing voters. It is about managing an image, too. But to accomplish this, you have to actually reach the intended audience. You have to be able to deliver a message. The candidate who best does that, taking advantage of the latest and broadest array of communication technologies, generally will win.

Think about the world we live in. Benjamin Barber, another one of my professors from Rutgers University, wrote a book called Strong Democracy.

http://www.amazon.com/Strong-Democracy-Participatory-Politics-Twentieth-Anniversary/dp/0520242335/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326072976&sr=8-1

In that book, Barber declares that we live in a noisy democracy where everyone talks but few listen. We are constantly bombarded with many competing political demands and voices in our society, all wanting something including their 15 minutes of fame. Moreover, as Robert Putnam writes in Bowling Alone, we live in a society full of distrust in government, politicians, and many other institutions, as well as a society with declining social capital or impetus to engage
We also live in a world of competing messages trying to gather our attention. We are pulled by competing product messages, competition among entertainment venues and options, and demand for our attention from new, old, and social media in a fragmented media market. Unlike in the days of Walter Cronkite, in today’s world not everyone is tuned into the nightly news. Instead, few of us watch the nightly national news, read a newspaper, or a book. We are distracted and increasingly turn to alternative sources to gather information or be entertained.

We thus live in the world of politainment. This is a multimedia world where politics and entertainment pop culture have merged. We live in a world of competing messages, all seeking our attention. It is a world without a single mainstream source of news or information. Instead, individuals gather news from multiple sources that cover the spectrum from traditional television networks and print journalism to cable and now to the new and social media that includes the Web and Facebook. All of this creates a problem for candidates seeking to get their message out: How can they communicate in a noisy world with few listeners, with much distrust, and without one source of information or channel of communication to reach voters?

There is an old saying in advertising that companies will state that they know half of their advertising budget is wasted; they just do not know which half! The challenge in advertising is spending dollars in the most efficient way to reach the maximum number of potential customers. This too is the problem of politics, forcing candidates to follow the advice of Willie Sutton. If his decision to rob banks was based on the idea that banks are where the money is, the art of political communication in part is using the media to target where the voters are. Thus candidates who are most successful in using the latest and broadest array of communication channels generally will be more successful.
Politainment

FDR was the first radio president and used the technology successfully by broadcasting his fireside chats over it. JFK was the first television president and won that office in part though a televised debate in 1960 with Richard Nixon that made Kennedy look youthful and presidential while Nixon seemed old and scruffy.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QazmVHAO0os

Clinton in 1992 was the first fax president; he used it successfully to communicate with the press and to get his side of the story out regarding rumors of involvement with Gennifer Flowers and Paul Jones. In many cases, his campaign dispatched faxes offensively in anticipation of bad news. In 1996 Clinton became the first Internet president by developing a web page for his campaign. However, neither he nor Bush really exploited the power of the Internet. This was Obama’s 2008 legacy. Obama was the first Facebook and Twitter president. He was brilliant in using Twitter to reach young people. Rumors were he had millions subscribed to Twitter; and he released critical information, such as his choice for vice president, on it first. Obama’s use of new media was so successful that after 2008, businesses around the country raced to set up Facebook and Twitter accounts. Obama taught them and other candidates the power of these new communication media.

From FDR to Obama, the candidate who most successfully employed new communication technologies generally was politically successful. Why? Quite simply, in a multimedia politainment world, people gather information from different sources. Some watch television news, some watch only cable or entertainment shows. Some might tune into Comedy Central and the Colbert Report but not Leno and Letterman. Some surf the Web; others play with Facebook and Tumblr.

There is no one way to reach individuals. You have to use all of the media to reach all of your intended audience. Obama understood this. He understood that the social media and Twitter were ways of reaching young people, so he used it to reach them. He also used old media and new media, went on
DAVID SCHULTZ

Oprah, and explored other venues to get his narrative out.

If we think of candidates as products, and campaigns as businesses, then it naturally makes sense to think of using a variety of media to advertise and communicate. As new forms of communication develop, they are added to the already existing media to reach voters. Thus, using new media forms to reach voters makes sense because that is where the people are. This is why Willie Sutton robbed banks.

The fragmentation of news and the blending of politics and entertainment into politainment is significant in terms of how individuals get their information. In 2000 the Pew Center for the People and the Press found that for those under the age of 30, 47% were regularly informed about the news by late-night comedy shows. Twelve years later, it is safe to assume that Comedy Central and the Colbert Report have become the prime vehicle for political information for many. Some may still watch Meet the Press on Sundays, but no one can ignore the power of Tina Fey on Saturday Night Live lampooning Sarah Palin in 2008. From the late 1990s to the present, Letterman and Leno have been stops for all the major presidential candidates. How influential are these alternative media sources? To quote from a chapter in one of my books:

Hillary Clinton’s January 12, 2000 appearance on Letterman was a classic. It was a defining moment in her campaign for the United States Senate. Until that time, Letterman was a harsh critic of Ms. Clinton and described her as a carpetbagger. Her appearance on the show was the culminating event of Letterman’s “Campaign 2000,” wherein he staged a series of stunts aimed at getting her to appear on the show. A January 11, 2000 poll had Ms. Clinton behind New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani 49 to 40%, but her performance on the show was nothing short of remarkable. Opening with the statement: “I
**Politainment**

knew if I were going to run for the Senate, I had to sit in this chair and talk to the big guy,” Clinton answered a supposed pop quiz on New York State (it was later found that she was briefed on the questions) and offered her own version of a Top Ten List.

According to the *New York Post*, her joking with Letterman was so successful that the night was seen as a “major facelift on her campaign.” Her appearance was also a major facelift for Letterman: The normal audience for the show was about 4 million, but 11.2 million watched the show that night. According to Nielson ratings, the January 12 show was the first time Letterman won that time spot in 5 years. Not only did Hillary Clinton’s appearance on Letterman boost the bottom line for the show, but as a result, Clinton pulled even with Giuliani (according to the polls), and eventually went on to win the New York Senate race (BBC News). Since that appearance, Senator Clinton has continued to ride the coattails of politainment, engaging an author tour in 2003 to sell her book and encourage rumors of her presidential candidacy and political future.

Mastering the media is definitely a prerequisite for success in politics. Ronald Reagan, a former actor, was known as the Great Communicator for his skill in speaking. He brought to his presidency great skill in understanding the power of narratives, as well as his understanding of an entertainment culture, to tell stories and persuade Congress and the American public to vote for him.

Moreover, each media forum defines its own message or way of communication, as Marshall McLuhan would assert.
Think about television; it is a visual medium. There is a great story about CBS news woman Lesley Stahl doing a story criticizing then President Reagan for using staged political events and rallies. The story, which ran on CBS national news, showed Reagan at a variety of functions with flags flying in the background. Stahl’s comments were critical. After the story ran, she received a White House call and anticipated harsh words from the president or his chief of staff. To her surprise, the caller was positive. When she asked why the White House liked it, she was told that no one *listens* to television—they watch it. Her story visually portrayed Reagan in flattering light for several minutes.

Other candidates now do this. They do staged rallies and events with red, white, and blue flags and cheering, excited crowds. In many ways, political conventions and rallies can be thought of as simply infomercials for candidates. They are all choreographed to give the best visual image to candidates. Other media have their own strengths and may be more text or tweet heavy. The point is that each medium reaches a unique audience and therefore also conveys a message in a unique way.

The final point to consider when thinking about how candidates message is to think again about the content of the message and the audience to be reached. A basic rule of all forms of clear communication is to remember KISS—keep it short and simple. A candidates needs to have a simple message that can be repeated over and over—much like a product slogan or advertisement. Great political messages follow some simple rules. First, tell a dramatic story. Second, draw on familiar themes or story line, such as good versus evil. Third, stress people over policy. Powerful commercial ads—go watch them—do this all the time. They tell stories that are personalized.

Political ads do this too, but with the addition of drawing on pop culture references to give them a boost. In 1984 Walter Mondale criticized the perceived thinness of Gary Hart’s political and policy ideas by stealing a line from a Wendy’s hamburger commercial—“Where’s the beef?” Reagan stole
“Make my day” from Clint Eastwood.

But candidates all need to know their audiences. Again, business folklore is legendary for stories of efforts to translate slogans into another language that have backfired. The “Got Milk?” campaign bombed initially when the translation to Spanish asked, “Are you lactating?” A company tried to market Italian calzones in Spanish, only to find the word *calzones* means “underwear” in that language. Words matter, and contemporary politicians spend lots of time with polling and focus groups selecting the right words for particular audiences.

Another way audience matters is in terms of their viewing habits. People have limited attention spans and consumption patterns. During the 2004 presidential race between Bush and Kerry, one television station asked me to watch the debates in their studio and critique them. The debates were long, and I noticed a pattern. About every 30 minutes—at the top and bottom of the hours—the two candidates seemed to repeat themselves.

What I noticed was an approximate 30-minute cycle to their themes. The candidates seemed to understand that viewers check in and out of the debates, often at the top and the bottom of the hour; few watch the entire debate. Bush and Kerry understood that television viewers were conditioned by the 30-minute sitcom and the 60-minute drama. Viewers might be channel surfing, flipping dials at the top and bottom of the hour. If you want to reach people and viewers, then, time your messages and themes to reflect these viewer consumption patterns. I have noticed similar patterns in presidential races since then. Look to see how candidates message by repeating familiar themes again and again across a variety of media.

Finally, in an effort to maximize the targeting to audiences, political candidates need to understand the power of niche marketing. In the field of marketing, companies know a lot about people’s consumption habits and use that information to sell us new products. Anyone who has shopped Amazon.com can see how that Web service uses personalized
recommendations to sell them products they might be interested in, based on past consumption habits.

However, consumer consumption patterns also appear to have some connection to political choices. Gun owners generally are conservative Republicans, and Subaru owners are liberal Democrats. Many campaigns now use marketing data to locate and direct political advertising to specific populations. These populations may be small and narrowly focused. Mary Penn (a one-time pollster and media consultant for Hillary Clinton) and E. Kinney Zalesne wrote in Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes that small trends add up to large numbers of people.

http://www.amazon.com/Microtrends-Forces-Behind-Tomorrows-Changes/dp/B003UYV1S8/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326142261&sr=1-1

In a country of 300 million, a trend that affects only 1% of the population still means 1 million people. Penn and Zalesne discuss the importance of understanding microtrends to reach consumers. The same is true with politicians.

An emerging and smart political communications strategy is using consumer marketing data to identify potential voters while exploiting microtrends and analysis to locate and reach potential voters. In 2011 stories also appeared that marketers and political campaigns were exploiting GPS in phones to locate, identify, and reach potential voters. Candidates who can do this most successfully will have an advantage in communicating their narratives and in mobilizing voters in 2012 and in the future.
Rule 9
Be True to Yourself
(Politics is about being who you are and being a clown; be real and laugh at yourself.)

Voters are smart and ultimately can sense who is real or fake. Abraham Lincoln captured this point well when he was attributed as saying: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” His point is that there is a limit to how long you can lie or deceive before you are caught or detected. Lying in politics is one thing, but it never works. Ask Richard Nixon. But being true to yourself is about something different; it is about character and ultimately being who you are that matters to voters.

I remember speaking to a Jewish Community Center group in St. Paul, Minnesota, in early October 2004. I was discussing the Bush–Kerry race. When I finished, a darling woman in her 80s turned to me and asked, “Do you know why Kerry is going to lose?” I asked her why. She replied, “Because he’s a snot!” I asked her why and how she came to that conclusion, and she then told me that until a few months earlier she had lived in a condo association near Kerry and his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry. She told me that Teresa was sweet but that Kerry was a snot (she used snot several times in her comments) because he never said hello, did not put his trash or recycling out on the right day, and parked his car wrong so it hogged two spots. All this qualified him as a snot for her.

The woman’s comments were prescient. Polls during the 2004 election consistently found that the public did not like Kerry as a person when compared to Bush. Bush, both in 2000 against Gore and then again in 2004, was the candidate voters wanted to have a beer or coffee with. They simply liked him
DAVID SCHULTZ

better.

Likeability is a big factor in politics. Voters want to like their candidates. They want to be able relate to them and believe that candidates can identify with or understand the lives of voters. In 1992, George Bush demonstrated how disconnected he was from voters when he could not explain how the recession was affecting him. That impression was compounded by his marveling at a scanning device in a store and by looking at his watch during a live and nationally televised presidential debate.


Other candidates in 1992 were quizzed about the price of a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, or a gallon of milk—and they had no clue. They all seemed disconnected from the daily lives of voters. One story tells of Senator Lamar Alexander, a millionaire and one-time candidate for president, buying flannel shirts so he could dress like average people. However, no one told him that new shirts have pins and creases in them. The shirts looked contrived on him.

Candidates who try to hide who they are do so at their peril. In 2008 McCain suffered politically when asked how many homes he owned and could not come up with the correct answer (at least eight is the answer). Mitt Romney is a multimillionaire who tries to bond with average folks. At one point in 2011, he
Politainment

told an unemployed worker that he too was without a job. That comment bombed. At another point, he bet a fellow GOP presidential contender $10,000 in a televised debate. To further compound his problems as an out-of-touch millionaire, Romney later said his effective tax rate was 15%, and he did not make much in speaking fees—only $375,000 in 2011. That figure is seven times the average household income in the United States.

In one 2011 debate, former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty made fun of Romney’s larger mansion. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMLL1wwp5Dg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMLL1wwp5Dg)
Pawlenty had offered to mow anyone’s lawn if they could tell him how Obama planned to address specific issues—but for Romney, he said he would mow only the first acre. Romney has also sought to downplay his wealth by wearing jeans on the campaign stump and by expressing his love for fast food. Clearly, Romney is uncomfortable with his identity and is seeking to address it. His problems with his wealth dovetail with problems over whether he is really conservative or moderate. Jon Huntsmann best captured that issue by commenting that Romney ran for senator as a liberal, for governor as a moderate, and now for president as a conservative. Who is the real Romney? Voters need to decide.

Other candidates too have tried to be someone they are not, or to affect a particular personality. In the 1988 vice presidential debate, GOP candidate Dan Quayle likened himself to JFK—only to be flattened by the Democratic nominee Lloyd Bentsen, who stated that Quayle was no JFK. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRCWbFFRpnY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRCWbFFRpnY)

Barack Obama is accused of being a closet socialist. Again turning to John Kerry, he was criticized as being a waffler on issues and wanting to have it both ways when he declared, in response to criticism that he did not support funding for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, “I actually did vote for the $87 billion before I voted against it.” Such statements only made more comical pictures of him windsurfing while on vacation—proof that he or his positions blew with the wind.
The point here is that authenticity matters. The public ultimately can see who you are, and it is hard to hide that. Yes, a previous rule of politics declared that image is everything and that it is not important to have certain attributes as long as you look like you have them. Image can be molded, but there are limits. Voters do want to see the real candidate, to see if you stand for something and are likable.

Being who you are is important, and that speaks to the character issue. Character matters, but in different ways. Public approval for Bill Clinton remained high as he left office, despite an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky and perhaps other women. Clinton had a flawed character but did not try to hide it. Reagan was a conservative who talked of family values, yet he was divorced and never went to church while president. Was he a hypocrite? Maybe; but the public did not dislike his character, because Reagan did not try to hide who he was. Reagan was true to himself.

Being true to yourself means not trying to be someone you are not for political purposes. The public does not like that. Being true to yourself also means being a clown—especially if you are one—because the public wants you to be able to laugh at yourself. It never plays well to be self-righteous or too serious about yourself. Politics is serious business, but it is also entertainment for many—make it fun, and voters will support you.
Rule 10
Show Me the Money
(Politics is a business.)

In the movie *Jerry Maguire*, actor Cuba Gooding Jr. utters its most famous line—“Show me the money.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTFJocQBLyE

This was the advice Gooding’s character gave to Tom Cruise’s (Jerry Maguire). The same advice can be offered in politics. Money is important and makes the political world go round and round. Political scientists love to quote former California state legislator Jesse Unruh, who declared “Money is the mother’s milk of politics.” His comment acknowledged the critical role that money plays in politics. Money has always been important and will continue to be so.

Typical discussions of money in politics will point out the corrupting role of money in politics. Or about how it costs too much to run for office. Some discussions might contend that money is good in that it provides for commercials and ads to help educate voters. Still others might describe the presidential public funding system or contribution limits or other details along similar lines. These are all important topics I discuss in my classes on campaigns and elections as well as those on election law. Yet that is not the focus here.

Politics is a business, and its goal is to elect a candidate. To run any business, capital is needed; and making a product involves expenses. Materials and supplies have to be bought. Advertising is needed, as is marketing. Offices have to be opened and products delivered. All of this costs money. The same is true with political campaigns. Political donations are investments in a candidate, as are the costs of doing business to produce the product of electing a candidate. To paraphrase football coach Vince Lombardi, “Winning is the not most
important thing; it is the only thing.” Coming in second does not count in politics. As baseball player and former Cubs manager Leo Durocher once said, “Coming in second is like kissing your sister.” Politics is about winning, and it takes money to do that.

The focus here on money and politics is simple—you need money to perform all of the other nine rules discussed earlier. Presidential campaigns are expensive. In 2012, Barack Obama is predicted to raise and spend $1 billion. His campaign manager thus is managing a billion-dollar business. All told, counting the amount of money raised and spent by presidential candidates, parties, and third parties such as PACs, super PACs, and special interest groups, the presidential race of 2012 will cost at least $3 to $4 billion. Add in all the money raised and spent for congressional races and those at the state and local level, and it would not be an understatement to declare that $10 billion or more might be spent. This is a huge business.

Politics is a business, but it is also a great spectator sport. It is a sport that entertains in a politainer world. The business of politics merges nicely with the business of news, just as it has fused with pop culture and entertainment. We often forget that the news needs to make money. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox need viewers and ratings to make money from advertisers. These stations compete with other stations and entertainment options for viewers. They need the candidates, and vice versa. Both have a product to sell.

The point here is to recognize that as a business in a politainer world, money makes the political world go round. In general, money makes a difference. Candidates who raise more money are more successful than those who raise less money. This is not to say that money is the only difference between winning and losing. Tell that to Meg Whitman or Carly Fiorina in the 2010 California U.S. Senate and governor’s race. Both significantly outspent their opponents but still lost. Rick Santorum had no money, but he almost won the 2012 Iowa Caucus. Low-budget candidates can win, but they are exceptions. Lack of money can drive candidates out of the race,
as happened with Tim Pawlenty following his miserable showing in the August 2011 Iowa straw poll or to Michelle Bachmann following the 2012 Iowa Caucus. Similarly, it is not just candidate money, but money spent independently by them, that can make or break a campaign. Increasingly, money is being spent by organizations not connected to the candidates, and much of their money—at least at the presidential level—is spent on media buys fueling the negative attack ads that everyone says they dislike but that are nonetheless effective.

Money may be the root of all evil, but it is the root of making the political process work.
Three Final Rules

Explaining American campaigns and elections by reducing them to ten simple rules runs the risk of oversimplification. These ten rules started out as three and grew to ten over a four-year period. While they capture and explain most aspects of the whys and hows of campaigns and elections, other rules serve as potent candidates for inclusion in this list. Three are worth noting.

**Most politics is local.** Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill is famous for once stating that: “All politics is local.” By that, he contended that regardless of what the national issues are, be they overseas wars or crisis in Washington, D.C., ultimately all elections come down to how people view their own personal situation in their own backyard. Politics is personal. It is about whether I have a job, how I perceive the economy is doing, how the war affects me. It is about how voters are personally affected.

Ronald Reagan successfully demonstrated this point in 1980 when he asked voters whether they were better off now than four years ago (in reference to the Carter presidency). This focus personalized politics, although some criticized the question by claiming that it reduced politics to nothing more than appeals to self-interest.

When working in politics and local government in New York many years ago, I used to argue that I could run for office in any community in the country by running on a platform of keeping the streets plowed and in good repair, the garbage picked up regularly, and the fire and police departments doing their job to keep the neighborhoods safe. This statement too reflects the concept that politics is local. But not all of it.

Not all politics is local, but the reality is that most of it is. Yes, people do look to their personal situation and front yards when making political judgments, but we still care about the country and what happens to our neighbors, even if they are
located miles away.

The terrorist attacks did not personally affect most of us, but we still cared about responding to it. Patriotism prevailed. In 2012, the Iowa caucuses, famous for being a textbook example of face-to-face grassroots politics, were dramatically affected by political ads produced by national organizations. Concerns about social issues such as abortion and gay marriage transcend self-interest and the backyard.

Candidates running for office need to discuss and understand local issues if they wish to get elected. But they also need to understand how many local races across the country address broader national issues. Thus many national campaigns must connect people to their everyday lives to be successful, while local campaigns may need to raise broader issues if they are to motivate and capture the attention of voters.


He tells of running for office the first time: Right before the election, he approached an elderly neighbor and asked her if she was going to vote for him. She told him yes, but said it would be nice to ask me for my vote.

Candidates should never take voters or votes for granted. People want to be asked, and candidates should ask citizens to vote for them. This is the essence of democratic elections. Yet too often, candidates take voters for granted. Some accuse Obama of ignoring or taking for granted that the young and liberal will vote for him 2012. If that is true, he acts at his own peril. Obama needs to ask for their vote and earn it.

Again from my days of working in New York politics, I recall hustling in July to help get signatures from party members so that candidates could get on the ballot. My colleagues and I found that if we were the first candidate to knock on the door
asking a voter to sign a ballot petition, that person would not only sign the petition but also vote for the candidate in the primary and general election. Asking for someone’s vote is important, and no candidate should ever ignore that step.

**Rules are made to be broken.** Following a simple list of rules is no guarantee that a candidate will win an election. Moreover, the ten rules described here sometimes come into conflict or are in tension. In some cases, some of the rules may be more important than others in a specific election. But in general, these ten rules capture and describe the basic points that average citizens need to know when it comes to understanding campaigns and elections. But yes, rules are made to be broken. Candidates may well break the mold and develop their own winning formulas. Creating these new rules and adopting new ways to conduct a successful campaign is what makes politics so hard to predict. And that is also what makes politics so fascinating.
About the Author

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