

### *Chapter Three*

## The Context of the Race

Reinhold Niebuhr, the American theologian, once wrote a prayer that cautioned against foolish thinking. Support groups of all description would later soften its meaning, but what is now called the “Serenity Prayer” was originally expressed in Old Testament prose. It read,

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish between the two. (Sifton 1998)

The prayer was intended to focus the mind not on quietude but on stern wisdom—drawing attention to the rigors of differentiating the tractable from the intractable.

In a way, Niebuhr was describing an important part of political wisdom—the ability to look at a race, a district, or an opponent’s popularity and then distinguish what can be changed from what cannot. The difference is not always clear. In some districts, the number of registered voters is something that cannot be modified, while in others, a strong voter registration drive can force a dramatic transformation in the eligible electorate. New-style politics begins with an understanding of campaign context. Political consultants talk about the “the landscape,” “the environment,” or “the political terrain.” What office is in play? What do the demographics look like? Who else will be on the ballot? A discussion of strategy and tactics is meaningless until the context is understood—until the tractable elements are distinguished from the intractable.

The first part of this book deals specifically with campaign context. These are the things that, for the most part, cannot be changed. This chapter lists many of the basic features of a political terrain—the office being sought, incumbency status, multiplayer scenarios, election-year type, national trends, and candidates for other offices, geography, and other contextual issues. The next two chapters offer a detailed discussion of demographic and candidate profiles; this chapter begins with an elementary problem, understanding the electoral nature of the office sought.

## THE OFFICE BEING SOUGHT

Successful mayors sometimes fail miserably when they run for Congress. Successful congressional representatives sometimes endure embarrassing defeats when they attempt to move over to the Senate. One reason for this phenomenon is simple: the large constituency may be different from the smaller districts inside it. The electorate of a city will not be the same as the congressional district in which it is situated. True enough. Another possibility is that voters have different expectations for a mayor, a member of Congress, and a senator. A loud tie and bombastic personality may be loved in local politicians and loathed in higher officials. The formality of an executive might seem pompous in a legislator. Many candidates have learned the hard way that the nature of the office sought affects the fundamentals of the campaign.

### What the Voters Expect

In matters as basic as tone, body language, and personal style, distinctions make a difference. Voters might expect a Senate candidate to wear a dark suit but might regard prospective county commissioners in business attire as haughty. A judicial candidate will usually want to sound nonpartisan. Candidates for mayor will be required to know the details of local zoning laws and sewer problems; a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, standing before the very same audience, will be forgiven if he or she does not know the nuances of recent tax levies but will likely be expected to speak intelligently on issues of national importance—the federal budget, for example.

How does one discern what types of issues are best addressed in House, Senate, judicial, or mayoral campaigns? There are no clear guidelines. Campaigns look at the political history of the district, paying close attention to the themes of prior successful and unsuccessful candidates. They look at the issues that the current officeholder manages. Well-funded campaigns may commission surveys. When people say education is important, they might mean (1) that the state and local government, not federal bureaucrats, should invest more in schools; (2) that the federal government should offer better education funding; or (3) that there is enough money, but parents need to get involved. Matching the right issues to the wrong office can prove costly, as the campaign gets involved in matters that the electorate thinks inappropriate.

Voters seem to match issues to offices and offices to candidate qualities. Research in this area is not well developed, but, roughly speaking, candidates for executive posts are expected to have leadership skills and the ability to implement programs. Stephen Wayne, a distinguished scholar of presidential elections, conducted a survey to determine what voters most admired in presidents. The chief executive was expected to be “strong” and “decisive” and have the “ability to get things done” (1982, 192–95). Given the way both George W. Bush and John Kerry portrayed themselves during the 2004 election, it seems clear that this has not changed over the past two decades. One would expect to find similar attributes

admired in gubernatorial and mayoral candidates, which also involve executive leadership. On the other hand, legislative candidates might need to form a close connection with the average voter. Different candidates have different styles (Fenno 1978), but legislative representation is generally expected to be constituent focused. Asked whether members of Congress should look after the needs of “their own district” or the “interest of the nation,” a recent Harris survey found that respondents favored the former, 67 to 29 percent (Harris Interactive 2005).

A final element of voter expectation relates to formality of tone. In some districts, voters expect executive and judicial candidates to run serious, issue-based campaigns but allow legislative candidates free play to go on the attack. In other jurisdictions, all candidates, even prospective judges, can take the partisan offensive. Such expectations change over time. Traditional wisdom holds that candidates for the U.S. Senate should remain stately, but during his successful 1992 bid for the Senate, Russ Feingold ran a television spot featuring Elvis—or perhaps an Elvis impersonator—who had come out of hiding to lend his endorsement. Wisconsin voters gave Feingold a comfortable victory. Gubernatorial candidates should have executive stature, but in 1998 Minnesotans elected former professional wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura, whose television ads featured a seemingly naked Ventura as the model for Auguste Rodin’s sculpture *The Thinker*.

Ventura used a body double—nudity is still taboo—but the conventions of candidate apparel have been changing. Not long ago, it was believed that candidates should wear business attire in public. They might doff their jackets at barbecues and ice-cream socials, but they should arrive wearing a suit. In some areas this advice still holds true, but in a time when even corporate executives endorse “casual Fridays,” business attire tends to connote self-importance. Campaign ads and brochures today often show the candidate talking to citizens with a jacket casually draped over the shoulder. As more and more women have joined the ranks of the elected, bright colors have become acceptable, and during the 2000 presidential primary season much was made of Vice President Al Gore’s decision to switch from dark blue pinstripes to friendlier earth tones. Of course, when a candidate—any candidate, mayoral or presidential—is photographed with sleeves rolled up, the intended meaning is obvious: it’s time to get to work.

### Media Relations

The office being sought affects not just voter expectations but also the candidate’s relationship with the media. Successfully obtaining news coverage is one of a campaign’s most important goals. In order to gain positive press, a strategist must understand what reporters expect from a candidate. To many voters, the line between local, state, and national problems are hazy, but to good reporters, they are fairly clear: federal candidates will be expected to have a grasp of national issues, state contestants should know about state issues, and local office seekers should understand community concerns.

Generally speaking, the higher the office, the greater the scrutiny. Candidates for top-tier offices are often surprised by the rigorous grilling that they receive

from the news media. Candidates caught unprepared are tagged as incompetent or naive. In 2002, Democratic gubernatorial nominee Bill McBride, the challenger to Governor Jeb Bush in Florida, came close to pulling even during the last few weeks of the campaign. During a crucial debate late in the campaign, however, McBride could not provide an answer to moderator Tim Russert's repeated inquiries as to how he would fund his plan to reduce class size in Florida's public schools. With his vague response to the question, McBride suggested to voters his inexperience in dealing with such issues—issues, that, as governor, he would need to deal with regularly. Florida voters would retain Jeb Bush as their governor on Election Day (Semiatin 2005, 221). Incumbents are not immune. Some incumbents have been unlucky enough to be listed among *The Progressive* magazine's "Dimmest Bulbs in Congress." Local papers pick up such stories and run them in their political columns.

Scrutiny of professional and personal shortcomings also varies according to office, with the importance of an infraction increasing with power of an official. A reporter who finds dirt on a state legislative candidate might never report the discovery. Congressional candidates are held to a higher standard. The media hammered Wes Cooley, an Oregon congressman, in 1996 for making false statements on a voter guide. He had claimed to be a veteran of the Korean War when he never actually served in Korea. Cooley later explained, "I shouldn't even have said Korea. . . . I was in the Army. I was in the Special Forces. At that period of time, the Korean conflict was going on" (Egan 1996). The congressman was forced to step down. Previously, when running for a seat in the state senate, Cooley had apparently "moved a trailer into the district so he could qualify as a resident," although "neighbors said he never lived in the district" (Egan 1996). Cooley got away with a seeming untruth at one level of government—he served as a state senator until his election to Congress—but once in Washington, his past became news.

Ironically, the lesser scrutiny to which lower-level offices are held may allow for a greater number of unfair charges. Whereas attacks on House and Senate candidates are often checked for accuracy, charges against state and local candidates are rarely investigated. Reporters are overworked, underpaid, and have a great many demands on their time. They suggest that their job is to report the news, not to referee political fights (Dunn 1995, 117). Rather than track down every charge that a candidate makes against another, journalists concentrate on higher-level races. Since 1992, "ad watch" journalism—emphasizing the disclosure of inaccuracies (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995)—has come into its own. Presidential, Senate, and in many instances congressional candidates can expect to see their commercials, speeches, and debate remarks reviewed for content while many state and local candidates are effectively held to a lower standard of accuracy (see, for example, "Ad Watch" at Washington Post OnLine). The task of keeping politicians honest is left to the candidates and their campaigns.

Finally, incumbents generally receive newspaper endorsements and new research suggests these endorsements have an impact on the election outcome. As noted by Paul Herrnson, "In 2002 roughly 85 percent of all incumbents

in major-party contested races benefited from [newspaper endorsements]. It improved their electoral performance by roughly 5 points over incumbents who did not enjoy such positive relations with the fourth estate" (2004, 244).

### Overall Interest in the Campaign

Political novices sometimes become frustrated that their campaigns rarely make the news—and, in fact, that it may be of little interest to most voters. This is a natural phenomenon. Candidates, party activists, volunteers, and even some professional consultants become deeply involved in their campaigns and start to believe that others should be as well, yet most voters prefer to think about their spouses, children, bills, vacations, hobbies, cars, and jobs. Elections are of marginal concern.

The National Election Studies survey questions roughly 1,600 people about their overall interest in campaigns. A few things stand out. First, the number of truly concerned, interested citizens is low—about 25 percent. But the number is likely much lower because of a "social desirability bias." That is, many respondents probably exaggerate their interest in campaigns because "good citizens" are *engaged* citizens, and they want to be seen as informed about public affairs. Even so, the numbers of those ranked as very concerned is rather low. Second, it seems that those "very interested" has declined throughout the years. Finally, the peaks and valleys suggest significantly greater interest in presidential election years than during off-year elections.

Not all offices are ignored equally. There is a hierarchy of interest, starting at the top of the ballot with presidential races and dropping to Senate and House races—with the rest falling a distance below, right down to judicial posts and other offices (e.g., coroner) that few voters care about. One former elected appellate judge dismisses television as a means of communicating with voters: "You can . . . forget about any broadcast coverage of your campaign as a news event. . . . News divisions are operated as entertainment enterprises, and serious news is often not entertaining" (Grey 1999, 170). Statewide and large-city mayoral races receive a good deal of coverage, but most congressional campaigns are given short shrift. Absent a controversy, a colorful candidate, or a cliff-hanger, the general rule is that city council, county legislative, state legislative, and judicial races will be ignored. There are opportunities for coverage—creativity counts—but no guarantees.

The problem of voter inattention for lower-level candidates can be seen in both the number of votes and the amount of money that go to "down-ballot" races. Voters at the polls almost always select a candidate for president, governor, and congressional representative, but many leave the ballot blank for county commissioner. Lower-level offices can suffer more than a 40 percent drop-off from the top of the ballot. The same is true in political fund-raising. Individuals and organizations give money to candidates partly because they are aware of the campaign, maybe even excited by it. Presidents raise millions of dollars; county commissioners raise thousands. If few people are familiar with the race, few contribute. Candidates sometimes feel that they are caught in a vicious

cycle: without attention, they cannot get money, and without money, they cannot get attention—and as a result, many voters fail to take the time to look for the candidate's name at the bottom of the ballot.

### INCUMBENCY STATUS

No other contextual element has a greater bearing on the outcome of the election than incumbency status. There are three basic types of election: uncontested, contested incumbency, and open seat. An uncontested race in which the incumbent has no challenger is obviously the most predictable since there is literally no opposition and the winner is a forgone conclusion. Races in which the incumbent *is* contested usually go to the current officeholder because, as much as people say they want to “throw the bums out,” they usually return their own representatives to office. Most uncertain is an open-seat election. Two well-qualified newcomers running against one another can make for exciting political drama. In rare instances, incumbents are pitted against one another after their districts are merged. In 2002, Democratic incumbent congressman Tom Sawyer was faced with a difficult primary battle when his Akron-area district was merged with another district that included Youngstown, Ohio. While the two areas were similar in that both were industrial cities located in the rust belt, the political environment of each district differed greatly. Sawyer discovered that his main competition would be a young state senator from the Youngstown area, Tim Ryan. Ryan built a large and effective grassroots network, and with his knowledge of Youngstown area politics, he was able to connect with voters in a way that Sawyer could neither appreciate nor accomplish. As a result, Sawyer, the incumbent, lost his hold on the district to challenger Tim Ryan (Beiler 2002).

Despite occasional twists of fate, incumbency offers candidates a tremendously valuable resource. Officeholders enjoy higher early name recognition than challengers, deeper relations with the news media, more experienced staff, better finances, a broader base of volunteers, and stronger connections with parties and interest groups. Incumbents have usually cultivated their relationship with the electorate through publicly financed mailings, town hall meetings, and scores of receptions and dinners. Furthermore, incumbents, by definition, have at least minimal appeal—they were already elected at least once. Even in the Republican sweep of 1994, renowned for the number of sitting members it pushed out of office, fully 90 percent of incumbents were retained. Since 1998, an average of 97 percent of House incumbents running for reelection have won (Opensecrets.org 2005). These percentages are lower for executive posts, but they remain above the two-thirds mark for mayors and governors.

If an incumbent is scandal free and makes no great mistake, the challenger's odds are slim. Most nonincumbents have comparatively little name recognition. Political action committees and major donors are hesitant to back a challenger for fear of antagonizing the incumbent—the person most likely to be making policy after the election. According to congressional election scholar Paul Herrnson, “The typical House incumbent involved in a two-party contested race raised just

under \$977,000 in cash and party coordinated expenditures in 2002, which is 3.75 times more than the sum raised by the typical House challenger” (2004, 160). An incumbent, whose official position carries intrinsic power, can get news releases printed by local papers, while challengers might not get any reporter to cover their announcement speeches. Incumbents nearly always attract more attention and a bigger crowd.

There are exceptions to the rule. Generally speaking, the higher the profile of the race, the weaker the advantage for the incumbent. Presidents, governors, and U.S. senators benefit from better media coverage, especially in the early periods of the race, but these carefully watched races offer significant media coverage to the challenger as well. Often the challenger is a significant player in his or her own right. When Republican John Thune challenged the well-known Senate minority leader Tom Daschle in 2004, Thune was already a big name in South Dakota politics. A former three-term member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thune narrowly lost a bid for Senate in 2002 against Democrat Tim Johnson. Given the high profile of the 2004 race, the campaign was closely followed by the national media, and given Thune's career in the House and his 2002 Senate campaign, coverage proved roughly equal for each. Thune narrowly defeated Daschle, stunning the political establishment in North Dakota and in Washington, D.C.

Challengers have a few unique tools at their disposal. Many incumbents run the same campaign time after time—a warning sign, according to polling consultant Neil Newhouse, of “incumbentitis,” whereby incumbents look on a past successful campaign as the model for all future campaigns (Shea and Brooks 1995, 24). Moreover, incumbents have a record to defend, while a political novice might have a clean slate—sometimes an enviable possession. Says one columnist, “The most difficult opponent is somebody who's never run for anything” (Persinos 1994, 22). Likewise, although it has traditionally been perceived as undignified for an elected official to go hard on the offensive, challengers have rarely never had much to lose. This rule may be changing—incumbents are going on the attack much more often than they did in the 1980s—but the problem of early attacks can still be dicey. To ignore challengers is to refuse them recognition; to attack challengers is to add credence to their candidacy. As noted by campaign commentator Ronald Faucheux, “An incumbent under attack. . .but still running ahead in the polls, may not have the luxury of being able to ignore the substance of the attacks” (2002, 26). Few political stories get more coverage than an underdog's catching up to an incumbent who everyone thought would win. In fact, a challenger who persuades reporters of the campaign's viability is laying the basis for a media-ready Horatio Alger story.

Although open-seat elections tend to offer a more even footing than those in which the incumbent wins, they present their own unique challenges. In the recent past, many open seats were considered noncompetitive; the partisan predisposition of the districts was lopsided, giving the candidate of the dominant party a distinct advantage. Today, however, with the decline of party identification (at least from 1950 levels), many open seats are considered toss-ups. Ohio's Second Congressional District, located in the southern region of the state, powerfully

illustrated this point in 2005. Republican Jean Schmidt faced an unexpectedly strong challenge from Democrat Paul L. Hackett in an August special election—even though the district was considered solidly Republican. Schmidt hung on for a victory, but the race proved exceedingly close, surprising many in Ohio and operatives across the nation.

## MULTIPLAYER SCENARIOS

Elections are commonly imagined as head-to-head battles, but many races involve more than two major players. Many elections have multicandidate fields, and some even have outside interests playing a large role.

Generally speaking, there are two types of multicandidate fields: (1) party primaries and (2) general elections containing third-party, independent, and write-in candidates. Both are difficult to strategize. In primaries, party members are running against one another, and it is common to see rancorous family infighting. Three, four, five, or more candidates might run in a primary, and figuring out how the vote will swing often becomes a matter of speculation and argumentation. Some primaries, particularly in the South, have a two-step process. If a candidate garners more than 50 percent, the election is won; if, however, no candidate crosses the 50 percent mark, then the top vote getters are forced into a two-way runoff. In Louisiana all candidates run in one election regardless of party. And in some jurisdictions, a handful of “at-large” seats will go to the top vote getters: five candidates might vie for three seats, and the three candidates with the largest number of votes win. At-large races, like runoffs and all other types of contested elections, require a good deal of planning and forethought in order to win.

The strategic problems of primaries are creeping into general election campaigns. With the decline in party identification, voters are beginning to see greater numbers of multicandidate general elections. Billionaire Ross Perot, a populist fiscal conservative, added strategic complexity to the campaigns of Bill Clinton and George Bush, which were forced to determine which aspect of the Perot candidacy had greater pull: (1) Perot’s folksy call for reform, which would appeal to Clinton voters, or (2) his demand for deficit reduction, which would appeal to Bush voters. Neither campaign knew for sure. Perhaps the most dramatic example of a third-party candidacy was Jesse Ventura’s Reform Party triumph in Minnesota. The Democratic candidate had suffered through a bitter primary campaign; the Republican candidate was a former Democrat who had yet to establish a firm GOP base. With the major-party candidates busy attacking one another, Ventura ran up the middle and won the election.

Ventura’s victory was anomalous. Third-party candidates rarely win, but they often make a difference. They can erode a major-party candidate’s base of support, undercut the intended message, and siphon off volunteers. Third-party candidates do not affect incumbents and challengers equally. According to Herrnson, “House members who must defeat both a major-party opponent and significant additional opposition average almost 10 percent fewer votes than

those who did not” (2004, 242). One reason for this disparity is that minor-party candidates often join the race because they are dissatisfied with the incumbent. It is no accident that Ventura’s win came at the expense of two well-known Minnesota officeholders. That was precisely the point of his campaign.

An ongoing challenge to major-party campaigns in the first decade of the new millennium has been the introduction of interest groups as outside forces. Federal campaign law permits noncandidate organizations to run ads promoting or criticizing candidates for most but not all of the campaign season (see Chapter Nine). One study notes that in the 2002 midterm election, about 42 percent of incumbent-versus-challenger races saw significant money from outside groups (Herrnson 2004, 245). A prominent campaign finance watchdog organization warned, “In advance of the 2004 elections, an untold number of advocacy groups will be spending millions of dollars in a way that will influence the vote on Election Day. They will be running ads on TV and radio stations in your area, sending glossy flyers and pamphlets to your mailbox, calling you at home, and more.” It was a solid prediction. In that election, these organizations spent a whopping \$607 million (Center for Responsive Politics, 2005).

Outside help, though, is not always helpful. The battle over Utah’s Second Congressional District in 1998 saw heavy spending by a group interested in term limits. Incumbent Merrill Cook, an independent turned Republican, faced Democrat Lily Eskelsen, considered by many a strong contender for Cook’s seat. Eskelsen wanted to make the election a referendum on Cook’s record, touting education and other issues where Eskelsen seemed to have the advantage. The difficulty, however, was that Americans for Limited Terms put \$380,000 into a broad-based, anti-Cook ad campaign (Goodliffe 2000, 171). One observer noted that “while the efforts of the parties largely neutralized each other, the term-limits campaign significantly increased the negativity of the campaign, which ultimately reflected poorly on Lily Eskelsen, whom they were supporting” (Goodliffe 2000, 171).

## THE ELECTION YEAR

Campaign professionals talk about three different kinds of campaign year: on, off, and odd. An on-year election occurs when there are presidential candidates on the ballot (e.g., 2004, 2008, and 2012). Off-year elections also occur every four years, but the off years are so called because there is no presidential contest (e.g., 2002, 2006, and 2010). Finally, odd-year elections occur in odd-numbered years (e.g., 2003, 2005, and 2007). There are neither presidential nor congressional elections in odd years except for occasional “special” elections held to fill a prematurely vacated House or Senate seat.

The type of election year is important to campaign planning because the number of people going to the polls varies significantly. Turnout is almost always highest during on years because of the attention given presidential campaigns. In addition, the entire House of Representatives, one-third of the Senate, most state legislators, and many governors are elected during on years. Generally speaking,

off years will have the next highest turnout. Although the president is not on the ballot, House, Senate, and statewide races boost public interest and send people to the polls. Almost all states reserve odd years for municipal and judicial offices. Without high-profile campaigns, few people go to the polls.

Special elections also suffer diminished turnout. They are often held on short notice when an office suddenly becomes vacant, usually because of a resignation or death. In March 2005, Doris Matsui, a California Democrat, succeeded her late husband in Congress by winning his vacant House seat. Often, as in Matsui's case, there is less interest in politics during these times, and turnout is generally low. Propelled to the winner's circle by her name recognition and her husband's political connections, she won the low-turnout election handily with 71 percent of the vote (Yamamura 2005).

Political scientists have noted a phenomenon they call "surge and decline." In most midterm congressional elections in the past 100 years, the president's party has lost seats. The election of 1990 provides a clear illustration. It took place just two years after George Bush Sr.'s impressive victory in the 1988 presidential election. The months leading up to the 1990 midterm, however, had public opinion surveys indicating that voters were fed up with "business as usual" in Washington. Because Democrats controlled both houses of Congress, one might have expected the Republicans to take over or, at the very least, to pick up a few seats. As it happened, Democrats gained 17 districts in the House and a state in the Senate. While idiosyncratic factors clearly contributed to the electoral outcome, 1990 was consistent with a long-standing trend. On average, the president's party will lose almost 19 seats in the first midterm election of the president's term (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 228). In 1994, two years after the election of President Bill Clinton, Democrats braced for the worst—and the results were catastrophic. Losing 52 seats in the House and eight in the Senate, Democrats surrendered legislative control to the Republican victors.

Social scholars have struggled to find the causes of the surge-and-decline phenomenon, but no complete answer has emerged. One possibility is that on-year and off-year elections attract different groups of voters. Many people who vote in presidential elections do not cast ballots in the off year. These people, generally less partisan and less ideological, are responsible for a president's success as well as an influx of congressional officeholders of the president's party. During off-year elections, however, the pool of voters shrinks as casual voters drop out. Another possibility is that voters lose their initial excitement for the president. As time goes by, voters become increasingly disillusioned and then cast a ballot for congressional candidates of the other party. A third conjecture is that the type of candidate changes between the two elections. Aggressive candidates, angry with the president, run with steadfast determination, along with money from interest groups opposed to the new administration's policies.

A complete understanding of this phenomenon is elusive, and aberrations make prediction difficult. In 1998, for example, Democrats faced a perilous situation. Historically, the third midterm after a president is elected is especially risky for members of the president's party. In 1986, six years after President Ronald

Reagan's election, the GOP had suffered a net loss of eight Senate seats and consequently ceded control of the Senate to insurgent Democrats. In 1974, in the months approaching what would have been President Richard Nixon's sixth year (had he remained in office), the Republican Party had suffered dramatic losses in the House, losing 43 seats. Prior to the 1998 elections, the president's party could expect to lose an average of nearly 38 House seats (Abramson et al. 1999, 228). Six years after Clinton won the presidency, in the middle of Clinton's impeachment crisis, one might have thought the Democrats would lose badly. Yet the outcome was quite different: House Democrats actually picked up five seats, putting the party within striking distance of majority rule. Another anomaly came in 2002, when the Republicans picked up a several seats. Many speculate that the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, disrupted the surge-and-decline process. That is, the party in power was not likely to lose seats in this difficult time, as voters find stability comforting: "The pro-Republican atmosphere in 2002 helped the GOP buck the trend in which the president's party loses seats in midterm elections" (Herrnson 2004, 245).

## NATIONAL TRENDS

Saying that "all politics is local," Tip O'Neill drew attention to the fact that Americans care little about national and international concerns on Election Day, yet even local politics cannot escape national trends, moods, and obsessions. Each year, the national media highlight some concerns and downplay others, as popular perceptions of the "crime issue" show. One legal historian has noted, "Throughout the country, newspapers, movies, and TV spread the word about crime and violence—a misleading word, perhaps, but a powerful one. Even people who live in quiet suburban enclaves, or rural backwaters, are aware of what they consider the crime problem" (Friedman 1993, 452). From a crass, strategic point of view, many candidates find that the difference between perception and reality has little meaning. People believe that crime is rampant, so the discussion of lawless behavior has a definite starting point. Hence, in 1994, Republican George Pataki defeated New York's three-term governor, Mario Cuomo, who had repeatedly vetoed the death penalty, by stressing a tough-on-crime platform. In the 2000 campaign, even as candidates claimed support for better safeguards in capital punishment cases, most still supported the death penalty, mirroring the nation as a whole.

Like crime, economic trends and presidential popularity are powerful political tides. In the early 1970s, election scholar Edward Tufte found that 98 percent of the variability of congressional elections could be explained by these two factors (1975). Although the argument was found to be a bit overstated and although scholars have continued to refine the variables, Tufte's point is well taken: voters reward or punish candidates for events that are largely beyond their control.

But events are subject to interpretation. A Republican may believe that an economic recovery is a product of George W. Bush's tax cut policies, or a Democrat may conclude that crime is on the decline and therefore should not be featured so prominently on the national agenda. Campaign professionals understand that

public perceptions can be altered—for better or worse—but only if prior beliefs are taken into account. Whoever might be responsible for economic recovery and whatever may be the statistical reality of criminal behavior in America, crime and the economy are things that voters can feel in their bones. A campaign that wants to bring people closer to the “truth” must begin with what voters believe, not what they ought to believe.

Some of the most significant national trends are set into motion by tragic events, crisis situations, and wars. Strength, foreign policy experience, and military prowess were key candidate qualifications following September 11, 2001, as one might expect. The Democrats attempted to combat long-standing perceptions that the GOP is tougher on security issues by nominating a Vietnam War hero, John Kerry, for president. In the wake of a series of natural disasters in the fall of 2005, namely, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf coast, the mood of the electorate seemed to shift to simple administrative competence. Rebuilding that part of the country would prove expensive, and voters were not eager to have their tax money wasted. The national trend seemed to be that big spending was out, and competent management was in.

## CANDIDATES FOR OTHER OFFICES

Most people believe that presidents can help elect their friends down the ballot. The belief in “coattails” is deeply ingrained in American electoral politics. Most observers assume that down-ballot candidates can benefit from the popularity of other candidates of the same party higher up the ticket. The popularity of one candidate, it is assumed, will trickle down to others. In 1980, for example, a large class of Republicans was swept into office with Ronald Reagan. Many argue that Republicans won thanks to Reagan’s mass appeal.

As logical as the coattails theory may appear, it is hard to find direct supporting evidence. Leading election scholar Gary Jacobson suggests that “national issues such as the state of the economy or the performance of the president may influence some voters some of the time . . . but for the most part the congressional choice is determined by evaluations of candidates as individuals” (2004, 164). Jacobson’s “strategic politician” theory assumes that aspiring politicians want to win; defeat is anathema. As such, smart candidates pay close attention to early polling data, particularly as the information relates to fellow party members. When no member of their party is popular, strategic politicians decide to sit the race out. The party nomination is left to lesser candidates, who, with poor qualifications, scant finances, and minimal name recognition, lose the election. Years later, when it appears that others in the party are once again popular, strategic politicians enter the race. Because they are well qualified and adequately financed, they win. Under this theory, coattails have little effect.

The strategic candidate process was at work in the fall of 2005. Because of lingering difficulties in Iraq, perceived incompetence in the response to Hurricane Katrina, sky-high gas prices, and the indictment of a top White House aide, George

Bush’s popularity plummeted to the lowest point of his presidency—well below 40 percent. Some mighty qualified Democrats, waiting on the sidelines until this point, started gearing up for 2006. Said the Campaign Finance Institute, “Our analysis . . . suggests that the Democrats are starting more rapidly than two years ago, and that all major party challengers—but especially Democrats—are doing particularly well” (2005).

A point of clarification: to say that coattails have no direct effect is not to argue that they are inconsequential. The mere perception that coattails exist may bring strong down-ballot contenders into the race when more prominent candidates lead the way. Better candidates bring increased financial support and media coverage. If others believe that a candidate will get a significant boost from higher-ups on the ticket, they will be more likely to lend a hand. Thus, in some ways, the coattails theory may be self-fulfilling: because people believe that a candidate will win, they jump on board; and the more who jump on board, the greater the likelihood of success.

Campaigns can affect one another without a top-down relationship. As the 2000 campaign got under way, many speculated that Vice President Al Gore, who was running for president, and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was running for Senate in New York, would draw from the same group of donors. Fund-raising can be a zero-sum game. At the local level, consultants might find that a particularly “hot” race in a nearby county is siphoning off financial supporters and filling up scarce newspaper space. Ballot initiatives can also affect candidates. In 2004, a network of conservative organizations and activists led by President George W. Bush’s chief political strategist Karl Rove placed initiatives in front of voters in 11 states that sought to make gay marriage unconstitutional. In putting the highly charged issue in front of voters, Rove hoped to increase turnout among the white evangelical conservative bloc of the Republican Party and thus corral more votes for his boss, George Bush. The plan appears to have worked, as states approved the anti-gay marriage initiatives and conservative evangelicals turned out in large numbers.

## GEOGRAPHY

The geography of a district is important for several reasons. Campaign activities are molded by the physical characteristics of the district. Door-to-door projects are possible for the state senate seats encompassing San Francisco’s east side, and they are more cost efficient than radio and television advertising. Yet in some downtown areas, a campaign may find problems with this type of electioneering because high-rise apartments often forbid entry to nonresidents. Geography helps determine campaign tactics.

Among the most important matters are a district’s size, density, and location. While a candidate for Senate in Rhode Island has about 1 million people compacted into a 1,000-square-mile area, a candidate in North Dakota has about 640,000 people spread across nearly 71,000 square miles. Each state demands its own sort of campaign. Some regions are particularly difficult to work.

In a 2000 Illinois congressional race, Mark Kirk was running for an open seat representing the Tenth District, which encapsulates a chunk of suburban Chicago. Because of the geography of the district, Kirk's campaign knew that ads on broadcast television stations would be less effective than ads on cable and radio coordinated with direct mail. Kirk's campaign used the latter and kept the plan to advertise on broadcast television low on the priority list until late in the campaign so that spots would be purchased only with campaign funds that had not been earmarked for anything else (Blakely 2001).

The geographic distribution of the district may dictate a candidate's activities. The layout of the district might define travel patterns, which may, in turn, dictate the range of viable campaign activities. Some districts allow a candidate to drive from one side to the other with ease, but other districts may demand hours on the road or even frequent plane trips. High mountains, thick forests, or wide bodies of water split some districts. Some have urban density at their center, making the placement of campaign headquarters an obvious decision; others are so spread out that careful calculations must be made, and perhaps two or three headquarters are needed to cover the district adequately.

## OTHER CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

Any attempt to detail all the things that a campaign must accept as given would fill volumes. In the following chapters, additional elements are carefully examined: district demographics along with candidate and opposition profiles. For now, a few miscellaneous contextual features are briefly touched on.

### Community Organizations

Many districts have strong organizational traditions, boasting a local union, a chamber of commerce, a Rotary Club, and other such organizations. Politically active groups might provide endorsements and contributions, but the importance of an organization should not be measured solely on its explicitly political nature. Nonpolitical groups are often the center of word-of-mouth communication. In some areas, for example, volunteer fire departments loom large, both in size and in stature, and while these organizations are officially nonpartisan, campaigns and elections are a constant topic of conversation.

### Elected Officials

Local elected officials can help a campaign attract media attention, contributors, and volunteers, and they can make endorsements as well as introductions to other prominent members of the community. In most states, elected officials can transfer campaign funds to other candidates. That said, rivalries often divide political communities from within, and a candidate who inadvertently lines up on the wrong side of a feud can cause irreparable damage to his or her campaign.

### Political Heroes and Villains

Past and present politicians linger in the minds of voters. A political hero can be a powerful electoral force, offering endorsements, organizational assistance, and perhaps a shaving of advice. Not all past politicians are viewed favorably, however. Some depart public life on a bad note. Endorsements and pictures associating a candidate with a political villain can prove harmful. Complicating matters, endorsers do not always share their checkered pasts willingly. Many campaigns have been lured into believing that an endorsement will help, only to discover the full extent of the public's wrath.

### Social and Political Customs

Communities often have unique social and political customs. In some districts, yard signs are welcome. In others, they are considered a form of litter. A city might accept the use of mild profanity on the stump, while neighboring suburbs do not. Are political discussions allowed in church? It depends on the community. Is it polite to call people by their first name? Perhaps, but it is best to find out ahead of time. The rules can get complicated. In some locales, there are Democratic taverns and Republican cocktail lounges—and out-of-town guests are often expected to stay at hotels with a traditional connection to the appropriate party.

### Parties and Bosses

Local parties vary in the degree of assistance that they give candidates. In some areas aggressive party organizations are eager to assist aspirants to public office, perhaps offering endorsements during the primary season, while in others they are no help at all. Where party organizations are strong, it is common to find a powerful leader at the helm. Often it is the chair, though sometimes an influential veteran is really in charge—and sometimes it is an operative from the neighboring county machine. In a sense, helpful parties and powerful leaders are inextricably linked. Candidates at all levels view local party bosses as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they can be pivotal players, leveraging money and volunteers as no one else can; on the other hand, the party gatekeepers can become difficult to work with. In New Hampshire, a Republican presidential candidate who wants to call on experienced volunteers must first “enlist a poobah, a warlord, a New Hampshire potentate,” with accompanying political machinations reminiscent of “the old Kremlin and the Soviet politburo” (Ferguson 1996, 44). This sort of power structure can be found, in varying degrees, across the United States.

### Local History

Communities are proud of their heritage. Understanding what a population has endured, recently or in the distant past, can yield valuable insight to an electorate. Natural disasters, social and political turmoil, and even high school sporting

events can be seen in hindsight as momentous occasions. Team songs, former mascots, and great players of the past are critical bits of knowledge. Again, for most people, politics is only a small part of life. A congressional district encompasses a wide variety of communities, and their traditions form a complex mosaic. In many ways, to know this heritage is to know the district.

### **Tourism and Recreation**

Tourism and recreation are important. At one level, ski resorts and stadiums are often large employers, but also knowing what voters do in their spare time helps a candidate develop a connection with voters. A candidate in northwestern Pennsylvania who knows little about waterfowl might want to go on a hunting trip. A consultant arriving in Houston who cannot name a few Clint Black songs should tune into a country station. In campaigns, little things can make a big difference.

### **CONCLUSION**

This chapter suggests the importance of contextual information in new-style campaigning. Campaigns are about strategy, but they are also about the terrain on which the strategy operates: a party boss who will not budge, a district so large that the candidate has trouble keeping to a schedule, a national economic trend over which the campaign has no control but under which the campaign must labor, poor candidates at the top of the ticket, third-party spoilers, and an opponent who enjoys the benefits of incumbency. Strategists who cannot accept "the things that cannot be changed" find themselves at a disadvantage. In many ways, the difference between amateurs and professionals in the world of campaigns is measured by the degree to which they come to a realistic understanding of the district and then find a way to work within intractable circumstances.