

# **Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide**

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Excerpt from “Campaigning Through the Media”  
(Draft with embedded video)



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## **Advertising Strategy**

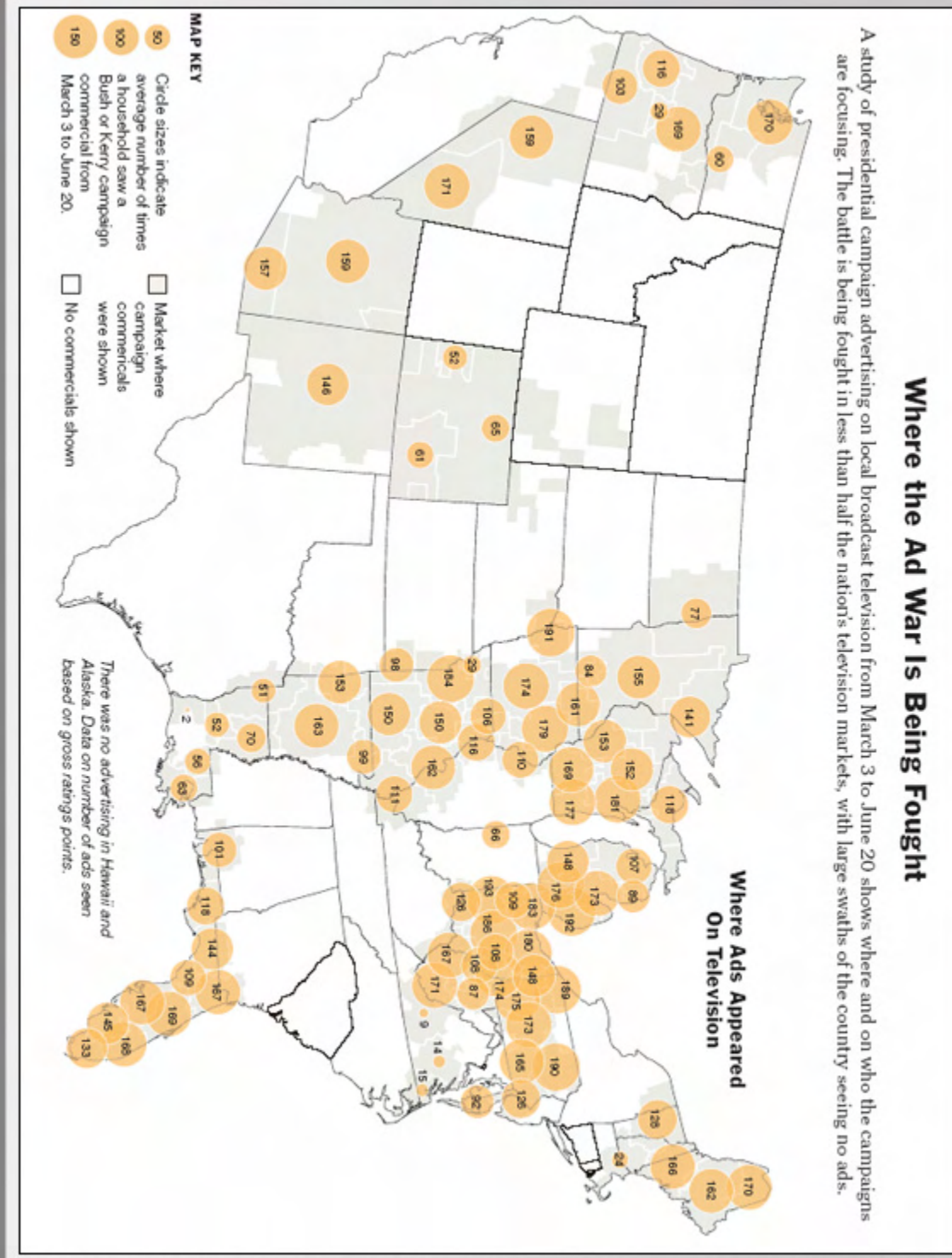
Unlike press management, where success requires campaigns to cater to the needs and values of journalists, advertising provides them with a much more “direct” route to the minds of voters. There is a significant tradeoff, however; advertising is unmediated, but a much less credible messenger than news reports

Effective advertising is not a simply a question of designing a persuasive and memorable campaign jingle. Of course, the overall game plan is to strengthen the sponsoring candidate’s “market share.” This may be accomplished by adjusting the advertising message to the stage of the campaign and to the specific attributes of the candidates in the race. In addition to synchronizing the advertising message to the context, campaigns must decide on the precise mix of affirmative messages in favor of the candidate (positive advertising) and negative messages designed to increase voter aversion to the opposing candidate. It is the extensive use of negative appeals that is the hallmark of political advertising. Commercial advertising stays positive; automobile

companies or department stores rarely criticize their competitors. Political advertising is different; candidates frequently attack their opponents.

Television advertising takes on a different role over the course of the campaign. Before spelling out the temporal contours of advertising strategy, it is important to understand that advertising is a highly targeted form of communication, no matter what the stage of the campaign. Unlike brand name product appeals, which air on a national basis, political advertising is much narrower in scope. As the use of local news illustrates, candidates are primarily interested in reaching voters whose preferences may be pivotal to the outcome of the race. Senator Kerry had little interest in any of the California media markets in 2004 because he fully expected to win the state by a comfortable margin. Conversely, even the most optimistic Democratic strategist will avoid wasting advertising dollars in Texas where the probability of a Democratic victory is near zero. By this logic, approximately 35 states are off the advertising table. Residents of these “red” or “blue” states will typically see no presidential ads at all. The remaining states, however, are blanketed with advertising (see maps below).

Figure 6.1: Targeting Voters

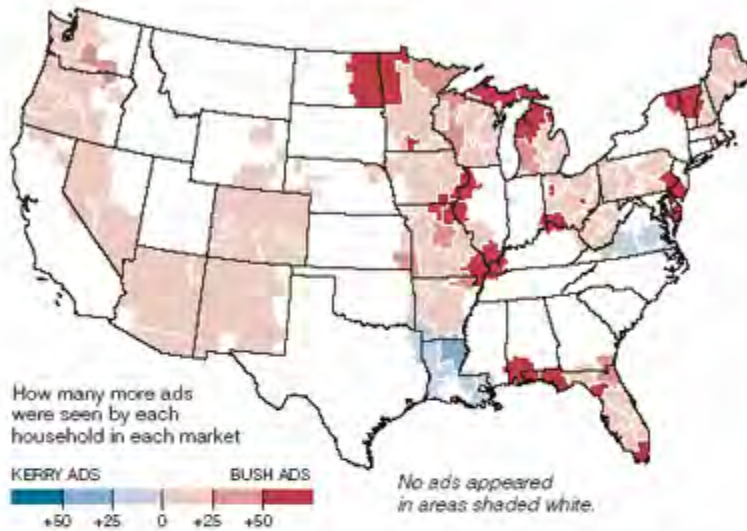


Source: Rutenberg, with Ericson. (2004). Campaigns use TV preferences to find voters. *New York Times*.

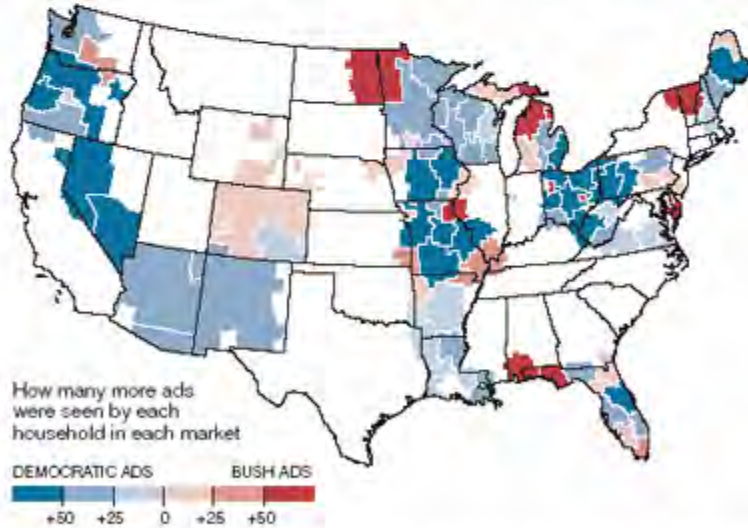
Figure 6.2: The Advertising Advantage

### Where Each Side Has the Advantage

In almost every market, viewers have seen more Bush campaign commercials than Kerry ads ...



... but when ads by the independent groups MoveOn.org, the Media Fund and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. are included, the advantage shifts to the Democrats.



Note: Only independent groups advertising in more than 20 markets were included. The groups that met this criteria were MoveOn.org, the Media Fund and the A.F.L.-C.I.O., all Democratic-leaning.

Sources: Nielsen Monitor-Plus and the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project (campaign advertising data); GreatData.com (television market boundaries)  
Mathew Ericson/The New York Times

Source: Rutenberg, with Ericson. (2004). Campaigns use TV preferences to find voters. *New York Times*.

The strategy is no different in statewide races. Those counties or areas that are heavily Democratic or Republican will be bypassed; instead the candidates invest in markets where a small movement in the numbers can make the difference between winning and losing. In California, voter preferences in the Bay Area are too one-sided to warrant an ad campaign and candidates for statewide office concentrate on the Central Valley and the densely populated and more competitive southern California markets.

In addition to singling out particular locations, campaigns engage in a different form of targeting designed to maximize the impact of advertising. For advertising to “work,” the audience must include adults who intend to vote. Clearly, advertising on children’s programs would be meaningless, and advertising on MTV would be just as irrational given the low rate of turnout among youth. Ideally, the ad would air in a program that draws likely voters. Local news, a form of programming that has enjoyed steady increases in viewership, provides just such an audience -- people sufficiently motivated to watch the news are also likely to vote. The first half of the local newscast is thus a prime location for campaign advertising; the audience is tuning in to the top stories of the day and their attention has yet to wander. Campaigns also rely heavily on “news adjacencies” or time slots just before or just after a local newscast. In some battleground states, the most desirable advertising slots (during local newscasts in particular) are booked 90 days in advance. Residents of Michigan or Wisconsin, at least those who watch television regularly, are exposed to the same ad so frequently that they can recite the text in their sleep!

One other overarching factor affects candidates’ use of advertising -- the state of the campaign budget. Advertising is the single-largest expenditure in most major

campaigns. A single airing of a thirty-second commercial during a 6 p.m. newscast in the two biggest television markets (New York City and Los Angeles) will cost approximately 7,000 dollars. In contrast, candidates can run the ad ten different times for that amount in Las Vegas, and more than twenty times in South Dakota or Montana (Advertising Guide, 2004). Thus, allocating resources into ad campaigns depends not only on geography (targeting battleground states) but also on cost considerations. Residents of smaller media markets are likely to receive greater amounts of advertising simply because candidates get more for their advertising dollar.

Given the cost, campaigns attempt to reach as many likely voters as possible with each of their ads. The basic unit of exposure to advertising is the gross rating point.<sup>67</sup> GRPs are scored to reflect the percentage of the media market that is exposed to the ad. Buying 100 GRPs for an ad, for instance, would mean one exposure for each viewer; 1000 GRPs would mean that viewers would see the ad ten times. In recent years, with increased diffusion of cable and satellite channels, consultants have been forced to ratchet up their ad buys to fight channel and advertising “clutter.” In the 1990s, for instance, running a single ad five times was considered the norm. Today, an ad is likely to air ten times (Farhi, 2004).

Ad buying is more art form than science. Depending on the ad, the stage of the campaign, and the scale of the budget, buyers might opt for the same level of GRPs throughout the campaign or, more likely, vary their buys to synchronize exposure to the ad campaign with the level of news coverage. The expectation is that candidates get

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<sup>67</sup> A GRP is defined as the sum of all Nielsen rating points (1 Nielsen point is approximately 1 percent of the media market in which the ad airs) for the programs in which the ad was placed.

more bang for their advertising buck when the campaign is in the news. This logic also influences the content of advertising. When some particular issue or event grabs the headlines, the candidates tend to incorporate that issue into their ads. In the 2001 and 2002 election cycles, the most popular spokesperson for Republican candidates across the country was New York City Mayor Rudy Guiliani.

### **Planting the Seed: Early Stage Advertising**

Early in the campaign, advertising introduces the candidate to the electorate. Biographical spots focus on the candidate's personal background and record of public service. Military service is especially noteworthy as an indicator of fitness for office. For candidates who cannot claim to have risked their lives for the nation, alternative "qualifications" include humble beginnings, their ability to overcome adversity, strong family ties, and adherence to a core set of political principles. By focusing on personal virtues, campaigns attempt to instill confidence in the candidate's suitability for public office.



Media Insert 6.2: Introducing the Candidate



Clinton - 1992



Dole - 1996



Gore - 2000



Bush - 2000



McCain - 2000



Kerry - 2004

In non-presidential races, where candidates might be unknown to voters, the first goal of the ad campaign is more mundane, namely, a boost in the candidate's name recognition. In some cases, biographical spots focus specifically on the candidate's name. Ed Zschau and Wyche Fowler, both little-known candidates for the US Senate in 1986, opened their campaigns with ads that simply explained the correct pronunciation of his name. In politics, familiarity is a necessary condition of electability; voters are disinclined to vote for a name they do not recognize.



### Image vs. Issue Spots

Once they have provided voters with a snapshot of their lives, candidates move on to their credentials. “Image” ads maintain thematic continuity with the biographical message by presenting the candidate as a likeable human being with a strong sense of public service. “Issue” ads are more substantive and either focus on the candidate's past experience and record in public life, or outline the candidate's positions on major policy issues.

The relative importance of image and issue advertising depends on the electoral context. In 1984, the Cold War had ended and voters felt secure on the economic front. This atmosphere of political tranquility was captured by the Reagan campaign in what is generally considered the classic image ad. Labeled “Morning in America,” the ad listed President Reagan’s accomplishments against a background of idyllic rural landscapes and smiling children. Four years later, Vice-President Bush aired a textbook example of an issue ad, calling into question Governor Dukakis’ credentials on the issue of national defense.



When voters are concerned about the state of the country, both incumbents and challengers turn to issue ads. As President Bush Sr. found out in 1992, voters worried about losing their jobs were relatively forgiving of a challenger with questionable personal attributes; they made their choices based more on questions of performance. “Slick Willie” was not as relevant as “It’s the economy stupid”

From the beginning of advertising, image ads have inevitably portrayed the candidate as a “man of the people.” American voters do not take kindly to millionaire

candidates from privileged backgrounds. The focus on the common touch is ironic; most presidential candidates are members of a distinctly elite group with appropriate prep school and Ivy League credentials. One of President George H. Bush's greatest liabilities during the 1992 campaign was that he personified the gulf between the well-to-do and middle class America. In a well circulated story, the President was said to have expressed his delight with the advanced technology of price scanners at a local supermarket, thus revealing his utter unfamiliarity with grocery store shopping.<sup>68</sup>

Issue ads fall into two broad classes -- performance messages touting the sponsoring candidate's experience and proven accomplishments as a public servant, and policy messages summarizing the candidate's preferences on public policy. Campaigns featuring an incumbent will invariably gravitate to performance themes. In presidential and gubernatorial contests, voters habitually frame the choice as a referendum on the performance of the incumbent. Challengers broadcast ads suggesting that the incumbent has weakened the economy, or that the Administration has done nothing to make the world more secure from terrorism. Conversely, incumbents are quick to take credit for economic growth, balanced budgets, reductions in crime, or other such indicators of effective governance.

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<sup>68</sup> After the campaign, the story was exposed as Democratic spin; no such event occurred.

### Media Insert 6.5: Performance Messages 1992-2004



Clinton - 1992



Clinton - 1996



Gore - 2000



Kerry - 2004

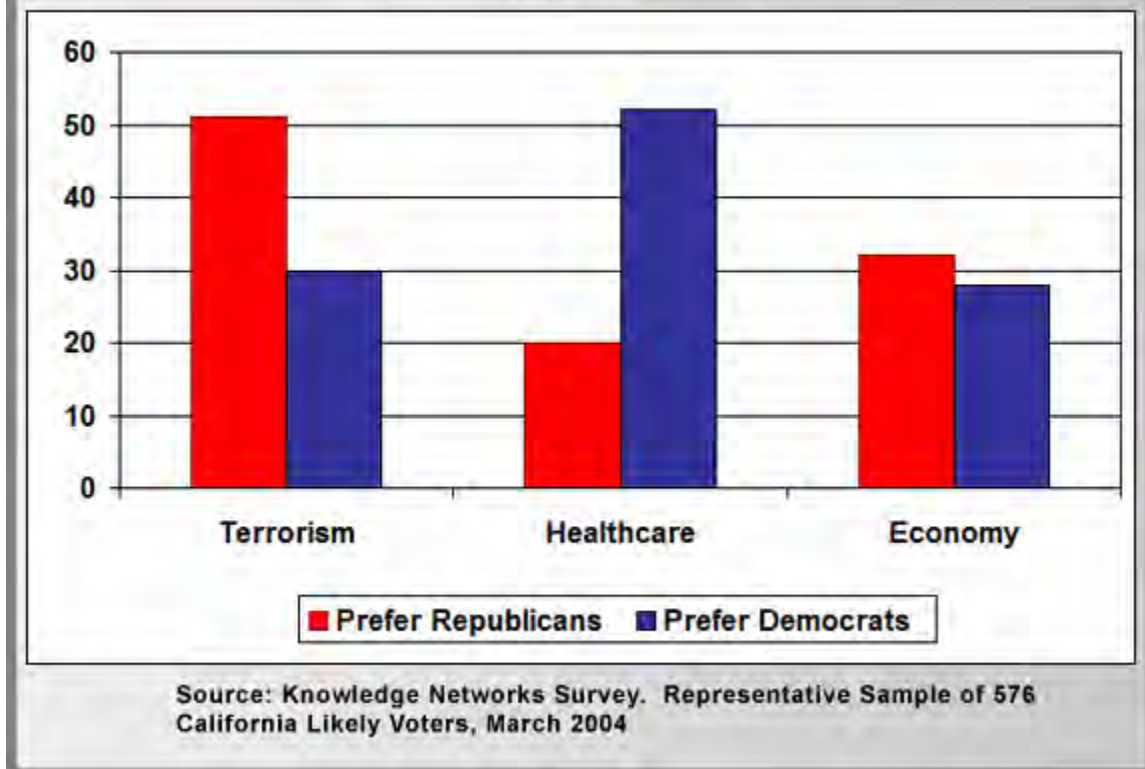
### The Principle of Issue Ownership

Policy advertising follows a simple formula -- highlight the candidate's positions, but focus only on issues where your candidate is favored. There are two specific implications to this directive. First, do not publicize your support for unpopular or controversial positions (that task will be taken up by your opponent). Second, single out issues on which you and more importantly your party are seen as more likely to provide relief. In sum, campaign advertising features "owned issues."

Issue ownership is a by-product of American political culture. Long before they reach voting-age, most Americans are socialized to associate each party with a set of interests and, by inference, with a set of issues or problems on which they will deliver (Iyengar, Valentino, Ansolabehere, & Simon, 1997; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). In general, “Republican-owned” issues include national security, defense, and the conduct of foreign affairs. That is, the public typically acknowledges that Republicans are better able to deal with these issues than Democrats. Conversely, voters favor Democrats on most “quality of life” issues including job and income security, healthcare, and social welfare. Of course, there are other issues, e.g., balancing the budget and strengthening the public schools, on which the public rates the two parties evenly.

How did voters rate the parties on the salient issues in 2004? In California, a recent poll (see Figure 6.3) showed that Republicans owned terrorism, the Democrats were preferred on healthcare, but neither party could claim ownership over the economy.

Figure 8.3: Californians Rate the Parties



The Bush campaign in 2004 attempted to capitalize on their reputation by making the war on terrorism the centerpiece of the campaign. The first round of Republican ads, released on March 5, made frequent references to September 11 and terrorist threats. Later in the campaign, the Bush team produced “Wolves,” an ad that attacked Senator Kerry as being weak on defense. Interestingly, this ad borrowed heavily from “Bear in the Woods,” President Reagan’s 1984 ad promoting a strong military posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. For their part, the Kerry campaign followed the standard Democratic script and promoted Kerry’s positions on job loss and healthcare while attacking Bush as a stooge of the wealthy.

### Media Insert 6.6: Advertising on Owned Issues



Reagan - "Bear in the Woods"



Bush - "Wolves"



Kerry - "Times Up"



Kerry - "Million"

The principle of issue ownership extends to attributes of the candidate other than party affiliation. Gender is an especially visible attribute, and American culture provides ample cues about the traits of males and females. Given these widely-held gender stereotypes, men and women candidates have reason to project their masculinity and femininity respectively. "Masculine" issues such as defense, terrorism or crime will resonate well for a male candidate, whereas child care and matters of educational policy will confirm voters' beliefs about the credentials of a woman candidate.



### Media Insert 6.7: Hillary on the Issues



Clinton - "Marie K"



Clinton - "Stand Up"

In-between “owned” issues are policy areas in which neither party enjoys a decisive advantage. These are “leased” issues on which parties can claim short-term occupancy depending on the nature of the times or the track record of particular candidates. The Bush Administration’s policy of pre-emption and the massive intelligence failure on which the policy rested provided Kerry with the opportunity to challenge on the issue of national security. Similarly, the Enron scandal and other instances of corporate corruption allowed Democrats to exploit white collar crime. On the other side, Governor Bush’s successful efforts to enact comprehensive school reform in Texas and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act during his first term as president gave him sufficient credibility to contest the issue in 2004.

Although leased issues attract ads from both candidates, the principle of playing to one’s strengths creates few opportunities for candidates to engage in a back-and-forth exchange on issues. Advertising campaigns generally do not resemble a dialogue between the competing candidates. Instead, they typically offer two essentially unrelated

streams of messages. Candidates prefer to talk past each other in the hope of promoting their comparative advantages (Simon, 2002).

There is one notable exception to this pattern. The frequent use of negative advertising means that the spiral of attack-counterattack is a typical outcome of ad campaigns. Before we discuss negative advertising, however, we take up a further iteration of the strategy of agenda control.

### **Wedge Appeals; Us versus Them**

Assume the following scenario. As the traditional kickoff of the 2004 fall campaign approached, the economy remained stagnant, the federal budget deficit had ballooned and American troops died every day in Iraq. Obviously, this state of affairs would have represented a serious liability for President Bush. Boxed in by the war on one side and the domestic economy on the other, the only way out would be for his campaign to introduce so-called wedge issues into campaign discourse. Wedge issues are designed to pit groups against each other, for the candidate to appeal to voters' sense of group identity. When candidates turn to wedge appeals, it is generally a tacit acknowledgment that they are losing the debate on generic issues.

Race and ethnicity constitute the single most powerful group cleavage in American politics. From the Civil War through the passage of landmark civil rights legislation in the 1960s to current debates over affirmative action and reparations, Americans have divided by race. One set of wedge appeals seeks to capitalize on this racial division. Typically, the strategy is used by Republican candidates, who hope to attract white Democrats and independents on the basis of their opposition to race-based policies such as affirmative action in employment and diversity credits in college

admissions.<sup>69</sup> In recent years, the emergence of immigration-related issues has injected a parallel Latino vs. Anglo divide into campaigns. In this case, the strategy is for candidates to position themselves as opponents of immigration. When California Governor Wilson ran an ad (see Media Insert 6.10 below) that began with the line “They keep coming,” most Californians immediately understood what he meant. In short, wedge appeals based on race or ethnicity are aimed at capturing white votes by depicting the candidate as taking a stand against the threatening demands of blacks or Hispanics. The appeal is either explicit -- as in the case of immigration or affirmative action -- or implicit, as in the case of crime, drug abuse, or “law and order.”

Cultural identity or “family values” provides an alternative basis for dividing voters. Initially introduced by President Nixon in 1968 as an appeal to conservative southern Democrats, based on Republican opposition to school busing, the slogan has since been broadened into a codeword for general conservatism and opposition to non-mainstream lifestyles. A call for family values is generally interpreted as opposition to abortion, feminism, gay rights, and sex education in the public schools. For President Bush, the values theme represented a clear advantage in 2004. In February 2004, the decision by the Mayor of San Francisco to issue same sex marriage licenses attracted considerable media attention across the country. It was not coincidental that the Republican-controlled Senate took up the proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage (framed by Republicans as the amendment to “save traditional marriage”) two weeks before the Democratic Convention. They hoped to elevate values

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<sup>69</sup>Since there are more Democrats than Republicans in the national electorate, and the Democrats have traditionally enjoyed near-unanimous backing from the African-American community, the incentive to use wedge appeals based on race is especially enticing for Republican candidates.

as a criterion for differentiating between Kerry and Bush. Conservative groups placed measures banning same sex marriage on the November ballot in eleven states (including the key battleground states of Ohio and Oregon).<sup>70</sup> Moral issues became a battle cry for conservative Republicans, many of them Evangelical Christians. In fact, the response “moral issues” was checked as the “most important issue” in the 2004 exit poll by over 20 percent of voters. This group voted for President Bush by a 4:1 margin.

Explicit appeals to wedge issues occurred in both the 1996 (illegal immigration) and 1988 (crime) presidential campaigns. Given the one-sided nature of the 1996 election, it is unlikely that Senator Dole’s attempts to run on the immigration issue had any role in the outcome. In August 1988, however, the airing of the notorious “Willie Horton” ad, attacking Michael Dukakis for his support of prison furlough programs was thought to have played a major role in the Bush campaign’s ability to overcome what was then a double-digit deficit in the polls.



<sup>70</sup> It is too early to tell whether these ballot measures had any impact on the presidential vote. All eleven measures passed, however, suggesting that the median voter is to the right of the center on issues involving gay rights.

Although recent presidential campaigns have steered clear of race-based wedge appeals, the same cannot be said of candidates for statewide office. In 1990, Conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms was locked in a close race with Democrat Harvey Gantt (the African-American Mayor of Charlotte). During the closing days of the race, Helms released an ad opposing the use of affirmative action in employment decisions. This “white hands” ad is credited with producing a significant surge in white support for Helms. Eight years later, the tables were turned. Opponents of Proposition 209, a measure to end affirmative action California, aired an ad featuring David Duke, a well-known member of the Ku Klux Klan, in the hope that the negative imagery of hooded Klansmen and cross burnings would weaken moderate whites’ support for the measure. The strategy failed and Proposition 209 passed easily.

