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A STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF THE ECONOMY ON THE OUTCOME OF
PRESIDENTIAL REELECTIONS: 1992 AND 2004 EXAMINED

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Political Science)

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Abstract

This study analyzed the varied impact of the economy in the 1992 and 2004 United States presidential elections. Initially, it was my contention that the economy is always the most important factor in deciding the outcome of a presidential reelections. Conventional wisdom states that a poor economy spells trouble for the incumbent candidate; this was the case in 1992. 2004 did not follow conventional wisdom, the economy was struggling but to a lesser degree and the incumbent candidate was victorious. However, as the study reveals elections and the campaigns that precede them are not merely matters of dollars and cents as the electorate examines many other factors before casting a vote. This thesis examines those *other* factors that led to the disparity in outcomes. Despite similar economies, the incumbent lost easily in 1992 and won easily in 2004. The study takes in to account the viability of the challenger candidates, the message of each campaign, external events, and the overall strategy of the candidates. In examining these factors, it became apparent that the economy is not always the controlling factor in United States presidential reelections. In fact, much of the outcome is determined by the ability of a candidate to adapt to the external events and appeal to the concerns of the electorate.

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Introduction

United States presidential elections and campaigns are undoubtedly influenced and shaped by the state of the economy and when predicting the outcome of any given election, economic indicators are always considered and the accuracy of forecasting models would suffer without their inclusion. However, elections and the campaigns that precede them are not merely matters of dollars and cents; the electorate has other factors to weigh before casting a vote on their ballot in early November. Voters also consider the state of national defense, social and domestic issues, as well as the character of the candidates, amongst a plethora of others. Therefore, although the economic climate is a significant factor it is not the only one in determining the outcome of an election and its significance fluctuates from election to election as the electorate's concerns and preferences fluctuate simultaneously. The candidate who is best able to appeal to the most pressing concern of the electorate stands the best chance to win.

The impact of economic conditions on the United States presidency is one that is well examined. The state of the economy undoubtedly influences an American voter's evaluation of the given presidential candidates; this is not disputed. However, much debate remains on impact of certain macro and micro economic indicators and the weight that an individual voter applies to each; the election year economy versus the entire first term economy; whether voters base their evaluation of the economy on their own personal finances or the nation as a whole; and whether or not voters are largely retrospective or prospective in their decision making on election day. Furthermore, the economy has been known to have a more pronounced impact in certain elections and particular attention will be paid to the 1992 and 2004 presidential elections as these two

represent the varying degree of effect the economy has on an election.

It seems indisputable that the economy does indeed have a large impact on the outcome of an election. However, that impact fluctuates given the conditions of an election. The general consensus appears quite clear: when the United States economy is prospering, the incumbent candidate or party tends to be rewarded with a victory; when the economy is souring the opposite can be said. Another commonality in the studies was the perceived lack of impact a voter's personal financial situation has on their decision. Voters do not simply consider their own personal economic situation when casting a ballot; rather they take many factors into account and their evaluation of economic performance ebbs and flows throughout the course of the campaign.

However, much debate remains as to the impact of certain economic indicators—GDP, inflation, real disposable income, unemployment, etc.—and the weight individual voters assign to each indicator. Additionally, there does not appear to be a clear-cut answer as to whether voters are retrospective or prospective when casting a ballot. Voters cannot be classified as entirely retrospective or prospective when evaluating presidential leadership; it tends to fluctuate from election to election with an incumbent candidate evaluated in a more retrospective manner and a successor candidate judged prospectively.

This thesis will examine two presidential reelection campaigns: 1992 and 2004. The 1992 election came at a time when the United States was mired in a deep recession with economic prospects looking bleak. The 2004 election took a different shape as America was entering a full-blown “War on Terror” in response to the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001. These two campaigns featured incumbent Republican presidents, George H. Bush and George W. Bush. The senior Bush ultimately was throttled in his

reelection while his son marched his way to a majority share of the popular vote and another victory in 2004. Why were the results in 1992 so drastically different from those of 2004? In assessing this question many factors will be considered in evaluating the differences that led to such a wide disparity in the outcome these two particular elections.

Prior Research

James E. Campbell, author of *The American Campaign*, proposes that the economy, particularly the election year economy strongly impacts the outcome of presidential elections. The state of the economy at the time of the election affects whether the incumbent party or the out-party is more successful at attracting votes during a given campaign. Despite the obvious impact of the economy, presidential elections are more than simply the state of the economy and voters weigh other interests in making a decision. Additionally, the impact of the economy cannot be measured completely through dollars and cents. That is, the economy also indirectly affects the vote because the condition of the economy impacts the general public's mood toward the incumbent party. Simply put, when the economy is thriving the public's mood tends to be more positive. The opposite holds true when the economy is faltering. Furthermore, voters also hold incumbents far more accountable than non-incumbent or successor candidates because the public perceives the president as the manager of the economy and holds him responsible for the current conditions (Campbell 2007).

Elaborating on Campbell's contention that the election year economy is of particular importance, he concludes that voters are likely to be most affected by the recent information about the current administration's performance. In simpler terms, voters ask themselves, "What have you done for me lately?" The significance of the

election year economy is well documented in presidential forecasting models as nearly every model includes the performance of the election year economy. Despite the noted influence of the economy, it is not always the decisive factor in every presidential election. Not every presidential forecasting model relies strictly on economic conditions; voters care about other issues and candidate qualities that are not directly linked to economics.

Additionally, Campbell contends that although the election year economy may be of the greatest significance, economic conditions during the earlier years of the presidential term also matter. A president cannot afford to preside over two and half years of economic stagnation and then attempt to stimulate economic growth in the few months leading up to the election. Voters gain their impressions of the economy not so much from attention to the statistical measures reported the Government such as GDP, inflation, or unemployment, but rather from their personal day-to-day experiences and observations of how others know they are affected by the economy (Campbell 2007).

Voter's evaluation of the economy is developed over time, and although the election year economy may be more important, voters take the time to gradually assess performance as different economic events come to their attention. Furthermore, in tough economic times partisanship affects perception. For example, a Democrat will be less likely to blame the democratic policies for the poor economy and be more apt to jump on a conservative president for economic misfortune.

Lastly, Campbell's main contention, in general terms is that the economy has great influence on the general climate of the election. Voters may be more pessimistic of the in-party candidate if things are going poorly and will be much more responsive to

calls for change. A poor economy can make the electorate angry and surly, and for a president seeking election that is the last thing they need. Although the president's control over the economy is limited, Americans tend to hold the president highly accountable for the current conditions. Voters who are particularly worried about finances may take it out on the in-party candidate, and in a weak economic time there are more voters in this predicament. Conversely, good personal experiences and observations of economic well-being are likely to foster a positive outlook and more generous evaluation of presidential leadership.

Morris Fiorina's work on *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* emphasizes the significance of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent party's performance in office. The retrospective aspect of evaluation is crucial, even for uninformed citizens he reasoned (Fiorina 1981), "typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent's administration." Therefore he contends, the less a citizen knows about the details of policies and platforms of an incumbent, the more likely it is they will rely upon this retrospective voting element in which they assess whether or not their life has improved during the current president's administration.

In this work, Fiorina examines the importance of retrospective voting by making use of variables including tapping voters' perceptions of foreign policy, economic conditions, presidential performance, and other politically relevant factors in models of voting behavior. He concludes that the "effects of retrospective evaluations on the vote are pervasive, though often indirect" (Fiorina 1981) particularly on their impact on partisan loyalties or expectations regarding future performance.

Richard Nadeu and Michael Lewis-Beck in *National Economic Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections* agree with Campbell's assessment that voters who feel the national economic conditions have improved are more likely to support the incumbent candidate. However, little is known about which indicators voters look at—GNP, income, unemployment, etc.—and how much weight they give to each. Despite the uncertainty of the importance of individual micro economic indicators, it is unlikely that the voter bases economic performance solely on GNP, rather they look at a multitude of measures and place different weights to each (Nadeu, Lewis-Beck 2001).

Nadeu and Lewis-Beck incorporate a "National Business Index" in their assessment of economic impact. The NBI, based on a survey of Consumer Attitudes and Behavior by the University of Michigan regularly asks, "Would you say that at the present time business conditions are better or worse than a year ago?" The NBI is calculated by assigning a score of +1 for "better", -1 for "worse", and 0 for "same". The results are calculated by the percentage in each response category, and subtracting the percentage "worse" from the percentage "better". For example, the 1992 NBI was -21, a year in which George Bush sought reelection unsuccessfully.

Agreeing with Campbell, Nadeu and Lewis-Beck conclude that in election years with an above average NBI, it is expected that individual voters will increase their support of the incumbent party. Additionally, personal finances seem to do little to sway voter's preference as voters who see their own pocketbook as improved are only slightly more likely to stay with the incumbent. There is argument concerning the legitimacy of the NBI incorporated in the study, as detractors point to it as a subjective measure that is influenced by partisanship. Republicans may tend to vote for a republican incumbent,

because they are Republican and perceive that the economy is doing better than it actually is. Despite the element of subjectivity, the Nadeu and Lewis-Beck prefer it to the usual macroeconomic indicators as they describe real disposable income and GDP as crude, rough approximations, at best of how the economy affects individual voters.

There is little debate that responsibility of the economy is attributed to the president. The two agree that when the economy is doing well, the manager gets rewarded with support, when it goes badly, that support goes elsewhere. Furthermore, the two hypothesize that economic voting is influenced by divided government. If the government has party control of congress, the public perceives that the president should have no difficulty getting laws through as he sees fit. It would seem to make sense that under a totally unified government, the economic vote would be enhanced; however the study found no support for the divided government hypothesis. Rather, economic voters focus solely on the president, giving him leadership responsibility regardless of whether congress is an ally.

Another basic claim made is that when an elected president is not running, economic voting will be weaker. Incumbent candidates are judged harshly on their economic record. The question remains as to whether voters assess past economic performance, then reward or punish the incumbent accordingly. Or, do they form expectations about the economy's future, and on that basis cast their ballots? Generally speaking, both past and future economic conditions appear important for presidential vote choice. However, when no incumbent is running it is argued that voters tend to focus on the economic future the candidate outlines whereas incumbent elections are largely

G. Patrick Lynch, offers somewhat of an alternative view in his study entitled

Presidential Elections and the Economy 1872 to 1996. One of his main contentions is that presidential power over economic policymaking greatly influenced from the beginning of the New Deal to the end of World War II and as a result Lynch contends that GNP changes became much more important in presidential elections after 1946. Increased importance of GNP after 1946 coincides with the passage of the New Deal legislation and Employment Act of 1946, as it was the first piece of US legislation to focus specifically on national macroeconomic performance goals. To summarize, the New Deal and the end of WWII may have increased voter sensitivity to economic conditions. The responsibilities of the president after 1946 included things such as full employment and steady growth which are captured in the GNP variable. Like others examined, Lynch does not dispute the contention that voters hold incumbent Presidents much more responsible for the state of the economy than a non-incumbent (Lynch 1999).

James S. Guseh offers much of the same in *The Impact of Macroeconomic Conditions on Presidential Elections*. He agrees with others that economic hardship in one's personal life or "pocketbook" interests does not seem to have a significant effect on presidential voting. He does not dispute the contention that incumbents typically thrive when economic conditions are good but suffer when conditions are bad. Unlike previous studies, Guseh explores the theory of policy voting that Democratic and Republican parties are perceived as having different macroeconomic policies. Democrats are perceived as being more concerned about addressing the problem of unemployment. His main conclusions are that macroeconomic effects on votes differ significantly between incumbent parties in presidential elections. Unemployment decreases votes for the Democrats while inflation decreases votes for the Republicans. Still, confusion remains

concerning the impact of each indicator on an individual voters decision making (Guseh 1996).

Lastly, *The American Voter and the Economy, 2008* by Robert S. Erikson, concludes much of the same: when the United States is prosperous, the electorate votes the incumbent back into office. When the U.S. economy sours, the incumbent or incumbent party loses. As the campaign evolves, the electorate begins to shift its vote in the direction of its assessment of economic conditions—toward the incumbent party if favorable, against if not (Erikson 2009). In accordance with other studies, Erikson contends that voters do not respond directly to their personal financial situation. Furthermore, he poses the question as to whether or not voters simply reward or punish government for the quality of their lives void of any thought as to whether or not government is actually responsible for the economic consequences of their actions. Or do voters act as rational economic actors guiding future government policy strategically by their thoughtful electoral decisions.

In conclusion, it seems indisputable that the economy does indeed have a large impact on the outcome of an economy. However, that impact fluctuates given the conditions of an election. The general consensus appears quite clear: when the United States economy is prospering, the incumbent candidate or party tends to be rewarded with a victory. When the economy is souring the opposite can be said. Another commonality in the studies was the perceived lack of an impact a voter's personal, financial situation has on their decision. Voters do not simply consider their own personal economic situation when casting a ballot; rather they take many factors into account and their evaluation of economic performance ebbs and flows throughout the course of the

campaign. However, much debate remains as to the impact of certain economic indicators—GDP, inflation, real disposable income, unemployment, etc.—and the weight individual voters assign to each indicator. There does not appear to be a clear-cut answer as to whether voters are retrospective or prospective when casting a ballot. Voters cannot be classified as entirely retrospective or prospective when evaluating Presidential leadership; it tends to fluctuate from election to election with an incumbent candidate evaluated in a more retrospective manner and a successor candidate judged prospectively.

1992 ELECTION

The 1992 presidential campaign featured the incumbent, and presumed favorite, George H. W. Bush and the challenger, former Governor of Arkansas, William Clinton. Bush was elected in 1988 in rather convincing fashion winning a majority of the popular vote and capturing forty states in the Electoral College. He took the office with high hopes, considered to be a disciple of the ever-conservative Ronald Reagan, Bush was expected to be the heir to his platform. Unfortunately for Bush, his first term was mired by a receding United States economy, which overshadowed his triumphs in the foreign policy realm in which he excelled. However, leading up to the 1992 election it was still nearly unanimous amongst presidential forecasting models that Bush would prevail and gain a second term in the Oval Office ((Elich 2009). The models accounted for the effect of an incumbent candidate in the field, low inflation numbers experienced during Bush's first term, and the short term economic boost in the election year economy. Prominent presidential election forecasters such as Michael Lewis-Beck and Tom Rice predicted that Bush would receive fifty five point seven percent of the two-party popular vote (Lewis-Beck/Rice 1992).

The results offered by various forecasting models on face would seem a bit precarious; given the overly negative public evaluation of Bush's first term in office based on the poor economy, disappearance of jobs, and even the growth in per capita disposable income across Bush's first term was the lowest in six decades. It seems the models placed too much value on the election year economy and failed to consider the larger picture; despite great success in foreign affairs, the economy deep in a recession and lack of job growth was enough to thwart Bush's hope of reelection. Instead, the 1992 election was an overwhelming rejection of an incumbent president and a landslide vote of no confidence in the conservative regime that Reagan and his allies had sought to create.

IMPACT OF 1988 ELECTION

In 1988 George Bush won easily and was an extremely popular president for much of the first term. Generally speaking, when one experiences great success in sports, academics, or any other field in life, there is a tendency to relax a bit and complacency ensues. 1988 made Bush become complacent; with such great popularity and outstanding achievements in foreign policy Bush experienced very high approval ratings leading him to take his foot off the gas and not work as aggressively at solving the economy as he should have.

Bush was to be the heir to Ronald Reagan and he garnered tremendous support as the heir of the popular and innovative leader. His approval rating soared all the way to ninety-percent after the United States overwhelming victory in the Persian Gulf War and the dissolution of the USSR at the end of the Cold War. Unfortunately, as the economy soured so too did Bush's approval ratings. By December of 1991, Bush had experienced an unprecedented forty-seven point drop in approval rating, all the way down to a mere

forty three percent (Loevy 1992). A measure of one's character can be defined on how they handle success. Instead of quickly shifting focus to fixing the economy, Bush largely ignored the issue altogether and was ultimately defeated because of his complacency with regards to the state of the economy. (Silver 2011).

THE 1992 CAMPAIGN

In 1992 it was obvious that the economy was the biggest issue. The election took place during a time when there was no real international crisis. As a result, the Republican party could not campaign against the Democrats for being “soft on Communism, if there was no longer a world Communist threat. Instead of channeling his resources and energy to the biggest issue of the campaign, Bush instead detached himself from the economy and sought to paint a negative picture of his opponent, Bill Clinton.

In a year of serious recession, Bush would have done much better to respond to voter's concerns about the economy instead of minimizing the rigors of the recession and pleading voter's to look on the bright side. Instead he rested on his foreign policy laurels in an election that had little to do with national security. It is safe to say that the 1992 election served as a referendum on Bush's first term in office, but voter's also analyzed Bush prospectively and did not see him as the one to lead America out of recession.

George Bush did a remarkable job as commander-in-chief of the United States military. During his first term he oversaw the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the former USSR. As significant as these accomplishments were, Bush's greatest triumph was Operation Desert Storm, the first major foreign crisis the United States faced since the dissolution of the USSR in August 1990. Bush would not stand for an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—a major supplier of oil to the United States—and within one

hundred hours after the ground attack was initiated, Kuwait was liberated. The operation was an overwhelming success; and President Bush was applauded for his leadership abilities. At the conclusion of the war in March 1991, Bush received some of the highest approval ratings on record. A survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in March of 1991 found that 86 percent of respondents said that Bush had strong leadership qualities (Pomper 1993).

The Persian Gulf War momentarily overshadowed the receding United States economy but by the time of the November election, the main issue remained about the economy. The impact of the Persian Gulf War rapidly decreased as the economy continued to falter as evidenced by a public opinion poll of the New Hampshire Primary voters. According to the poll, only seven percent of the respondents indicated that the Persian Gulf War had played any role in their voting decision in the primary in that state (Toner 1992). Voters remained fixated on the economy. Eighty-two percent of New Hampshire voters ranked the economy as the top issue as the budget deficit was projected to reach \$400 billion by 1993 and a \$4 trillion overall debt (Toner 1992). Unemployment remained high at more than seven percent and joblessness rates were as high as ten percent in some places. Bush failed to recognize these warning signs instead he paid very little attention to them leading his critics within the conservative wing to characterize him as having been “grossly out of touch with a larger public, for being an insider elitists, for undercutting if not betraying the legacy he had inherited, and for lacking the political imagination to provide leadership or even a minimally adequate definition of himself and his purposes” (Pomper 1992). Bush’s leadership qualities had always been his source of strength, but given the climate of the 1992 election, his greatest strength was rendered

largely irrelevant in an election so focused on the economy.

The importance of the election year economy and its prospects for the future has a drastic impact on the outcome of the following election. The state of the economy at the time of the election affects whether the incumbent party or the challenging party is more successful at attracting votes during the campaign from the “late deciding” portion of the electorate. An economy that appears to be headed in the right direction, in the past at times, has been able to overshadow otherwise faltering economies. Generally speaking, voters tend to place a higher emphasis on the state of the economy during the election year as they may ask themselves of the President and administration, ‘what have you done for me lately?’ Nearly every presidential forecasting model accounts for the election year economy, but that is not to say the previous three years of the term are insignificant. The economy as a whole during Bush’s term led to a widespread public distrust in Bush’s ability to lead America out of the recession. Even so, it was still Bush’s election to lose as a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that only sixteen percent of registered voters nationally viewed Clinton favorably, while forty percent viewed him unfavorably (Pomper 1992). These numbers did not inspire confidence for Clinton and his team, but he had a much more manageable objective than President Bush who desperately needed to come up with a convincing set of remedies for the faltering economy. Instead, Clinton sought to strengthen his image by presenting himself as a family man, able to relate to the American people.

John Morin, the director of polling for the *Washington Post* described Bush as “the most unpopular incumbent president to seek re-election in the past five decades” (Pomper 1992). The numbers backed up Morin’s claim. President Bush had the lowest

job approval rating of any president at a similar point in his presidency. As a matter of fact, since World War II, only three of the nine incumbents (including Bush) have had lower approval ratings at any point in their terms. Bush also had the highest disapproval rating of any incumbent president seeking reelection, with his popularity compared to that of Richard Nixon during the worst days of his presidency (Pomper 1992.) Bush's approval rating had dipped all the way down to thirty-nine percent, and no incumbent candidate seeking reelection has ever been successful with an approval rating so low. The relationship between approval rating and reelection odds seems quite simple at first glance: every incumbent with an approval rating of forty-nine percent or higher won reelection, while every candidate with a rating of forty-eight percent or lower lost (Silver 2011).

In theory, an incumbent candidate inherently holds an advantage over the challenger for a multitude of reasons. However, in 1992 it was Clinton who held the largest advantage that any challenger had ever enjoyed over an incumbent president at a similar stage in the campaign. In mid-August, with Ross Perot no longer in the picture and before the Republican convention, Clinton led Bush by a twenty-six-point margin the *Washington Post* poll (Morin 1992). Only 1964 Republican challenger Barry Goldwater was further behind in the summer polls than was Bush in 1992.

The fall from widespread popularity for George Bush can be attributed to a few factors. First, the dynamics and context of the 1992 election were vastly different than 1988—one in which foreign affairs dominated. Secondly, Bush was incomplete as a candidate—his interest in domestic politics was feeble at best. Undoubtedly, Bush's chief political passion and strength was in the realms of foreign policy and diplomacy. His

expertise in this area was not questioned. However, given the transformed economic setting in which 1992 played out, those strengths could not compensate for his meager interest in any aspect of American domestic politics. Bush failed to adapt and appropriately address the most burning issues in the United States.

In chronicling Bush's downward spiral from immense popularity in 1988 to eventually suffering the greatest sustained drop in presidential popularity ever recorded. It is necessary to mention his greatest rhetorical gaff which occurred all the way back in 1988. Upon accepting the Republican nomination at the 1988 Republican National Convention, Bush uttered a phrase that gave his competitors endless ammunition in the years to come. Bush offered a promise that proved impossible to keep in describing his plan for the future he strongly proclaimed: "Read my lips: no new taxes." The phrase was delivered with great conviction and unbridled passion but unfortunately for Bush it was one that would come back to haunt him in the future.

CLINTON'S RESPONSE TO ATTACKS FROM BUSH

President Bush certainly had his shortcomings and the challenger; Bill Clinton was able to prey upon Bush's complacency with regards to the increasingly troubling economic situation. Bush's lack of devotion to the economy led many to describe him as out of touch and unable to relate to the problems faced by average Americans. Bill Clinton was just the opposite. He was a southerner from a modest background, and despite repeated attacks on his character was actually a rather likable fellow. Clinton faced allegations of draft dodging, marijuana use, and even his marriage was a topic of discussion. Clinton did not shy away from the attacks; instead he grappled with them on some of the biggest media stages.

The Clinton team wanted to run the campaign on their own terms with the economy as the focus and not on allegations against Clinton's character. He did not want his opponent to define himself for if the electorate focused on some of the alleged personal ills of Clinton's character rather than Bush's lack of commitment to the economy, he may have be in trouble. The Clinton team made it a point to always be prepared to respond to attacks from the Bush camp, and he did so with great success. After receiving criticism from various media outlets about his marriage and rumored infidelity, Clinton and his wife, Hillary, took to the biggest stage, *60 Minutes*, to rebut the allegations. The episode was unveiled immediately following the Super Bowl, and Clinton's willingness to address attacks on his character by appearing on America's top investigative news program, quelled the controversy and satisfied reporters.

The bashing of Clinton's character would not go away, and he and his team were well aware of it. Media coverage of elections has increased every year and 1992 was no different. Mass media coverage of the U.S. presidential elections involves two key elements—news reporting and paid advertising. Media and the candidates are dependent upon each other; media depends on the campaigns for both news and revenue and candidates depend upon the media to reach the largest possible number of voters. The election of 1992 saw a dramatic rise of television talk shows in which the candidate could get their message across. Ross Perot, the independent candidate, notably appeared on the Larry King call-in show on CNN, where he offered a scenario in which he would consider running for the presidency. Forums such as these, allow the candidates to portray a message and image of themselves beyond out of context sound bites.

Clinton adapted seamlessly to the talk-show element of the campaign by making

appearances on MTV and the *Arsenio Hall Show*, both of which are primarily viewed by the younger vote. The Clinton campaign strategy was to use as much free television as possible. The assumption was that the more people saw Bill Clinton talk on television, the more people would get to know him, come to like him, and approve of him as an acceptable alternative to George Bush.

Clinton was especially savvy on the *Arsenio Hall Show*. He sported sunglasses while playing an Elvis song on the saxophone. Clinton, unlike Bush and Perot avoided personal attacks and used the new media venue to get his message across by unveiling policy proposals and allowing the American electorate to get to know more about him as a person.

Conversely, Bush displayed frustration with the new age of campaigning: “I think we are just exactly where the heartbeat of America is. But you couldn’t tell it because of all the noise and fury out there of Politics ’92: endless polls, weird talk shows, crazy groups every Sunday telling you what you think” (Peters 1992.)

Bush also attacked Clinton’s performance as the governor of the state of Arkansas by pointing to a list of indicators that placed Arkansas near the bottom of the fifty states on a host of measures. It was true, as Bush declared, that Arkansas’s per capita income was among the lowest in the nation, and had actually decreased under Clinton’s rule. Bush also pointed out that taxes had risen, especially for the poor and middle class. Only three other states had fewer people covered by health insurance. President Bush also mentioned Arkansas’ lack of civil rights legislation and the poor levels of education. However, statistics and numbers can be spun, especially when out of context, which is precisely what Bush did in his attacks on Clinton’s record.

In examining Clinton's career as governor it is obvious that he was popular among his constituents—as he served longer in that office than anyone else. The attack on Arkansas being the only state, along with Alabama, that had not enacted a civil rights law barring racial discrimination in hiring and promotion was a hollow one at best. As governor, Clinton had promoted a civil rights bill before the Arkansas legislature but it was defeated. Despite that, more blacks and women were appointed to state boards, commissions and government departments under Mr. Clinton than under any of his predecessors.

As Bush spun it, Clinton could not succeed as the executive of a single state. How can one possibly have confidence in the ability of a governor from a floundering state to lead the most powerful nation in the world? The American public was not convinced by Bush's attacks on Clinton and instead remained steadfast in their concern about the economy and what was to be done to get America back on track.

CLINTON STRATEGY

Throughout the campaign, Bush's primary strategy was to direct voter's attention to Clinton's character, or lack thereof as the Bush team saw it. Clinton faced a constant stream of attacks. He was repeatedly mauled for his explanation of his effort to avoid draft induction in the 1960s. Bush attempted to create Clinton's image as an untrustworthy, draft dodger not fit to be commander-in-chief of the most powerful military in the entire world. Bush accused Clinton of organizing anti-American demonstrations on foreign soil going so far as to raise the possibility that Clinton might have met with Soviet intelligence agents during a holiday trip to Moscow.

Bill Clinton's ability to weather the attacks from the opposition allowed him to

transform the election from a referendum on his character into one on George Bush's presidency by sticking to a disciplined plan. The plan was to put Clinton in the spotlight, and reveal himself as a family man who had overcome great obstacles through hard work and was able to achieve great things. Clinton's story was a representation of the American Dream in its truest sense. He grew up in the small town of Hope, Arkansas in a house that lacked indoor plumbing. He lost his father at a very young age, and had to work for everything he gained. This story of perseverance largely overshadowed the attacks on his character and credibility. People appreciated Clinton's struggle, and he was able to portray himself as "one of them" and not an outsider elitist with no perspective on the plight of the every day American.

In this sense, Clinton was able to separate himself from Bush as a man of the people while Bush was characterized as out of touch and lacking compassion for the economic problems facing the people. In times of economic hardship, Clinton was able to present himself as the necessary agent of change. In a speech at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, Clinton said that he would be "a different kind of President with a very different economic policy" (Lohr 1992) from Bush's. The economic slump of the last four years was George Bush's chief weakness and Clinton's greatest strength. In late August of 1992, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that seventy seven percent of registered voters disapproved of the way President Bush had dealt with the economy while a mere seventeen percent approved of the president's handling of the economy (Rosenbaum 1992).

Clinton remained steadfast in his effort to keep the focus on the economy and he did so largely through his campaign rhetoric. Everywhere he went he reminded voters

that economic growth under Bush had been slower than in any other Presidential term since World War II, and that more business had failed and fewer jobs had been created. While Clinton was heavily focused on the economy, and appealing to the voters concerns, Bush appeared to be just the opposite as his rhetoric largely downplayed the economic troubles as he encouraged the electorate to look on the bright side. Clinton appealed to the middle class, and when he officially announced his candidacy on October 3, 1991 standing outside the Old State House in the Arkansas capital city of Little Rock, he declared that “We must turn this country around and get it working again...we’ve got to fight for middle-class Americans for a change” (Loevy 1992).

Clinton masterfully quoted George Bush speaking about President Jimmy Carter in 1980, “I believe he wants to avoid debate because he wants to avoid talking about his economic record, I mean, how do you debate the merits of an economic policy that put 1.9 million people out of work? [Clinton continued]: This is 1992. The figure is not 1.9 million. There are three million more Americans out of work than when Bush took office (Pomper 1993). Bush once again had put his foot in his mouth, and Clinton made him pay for it.

The impact of Ross Perot, the wealthy businessman from Texas must also be considered. The billionaire from Texas advocated perhaps even more vehemently that the American economy was in serious trouble and it needed to be the focus of the election. Perot did not hesitate to address the federal deficit issues as the main source of the nation’s problems. Perot seemed to be everywhere whether it was televised appearances, his famous long infomercials, and at the presidential debates. His presence was felt by the American people as evidenced by a set of four Times-Mirror surveys

conducted in October, which found that Ross Perot had commanded more voter attention than George Bush or Bill Clinton (Kellerman 1992). As a matter of fact, thirty-nine percent of voters said they had heard the most about Perot in the news media, twenty six percent named Clinton, and only twenty two percent named George Bush. This number could perhaps be attributed to the familiarity Bush had established with the American public throughout the first term; still the truth of the matter was that Perot and Clinton's unrelenting focus on the economy was getting more and more airtime as the election neared.

CLINTON MOBILIZATION OF KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Bill Clinton effectively mobilized specific demographics, and was able to gain a great advantage over the incumbent President Bush. Historically, the core Democratic constituency since the New Deal of the 1930s has been the less advantaged in society: those of lower income and education, urban residents, nonwhites, and ethnic minorities. Clinton was able to garner tremendous support from the traditional bulwarks of the party. He had major advantages amongst America's most disadvantaged: blacks, Hispanics, the unemployed, the poor, and those with only a high school education. Furthermore, Clinton won three of every five votes from those below the poverty level, with decreasing proportions up the income ladder, and only about one of three votes from the wealthy. One historical exception remained as well, the Jewish vote (Pomper 1993). Generally speaking, this group maintains relatively high-levels of social status but interestingly enough; they gave Clinton a higher proportion than any other white ethnic or religious group. Clinton had an obvious personal appeal to white male southerners and born-again Christians, a demographic overlapping the economically misfortunate and less educated.

Clinton was able to gain wide range support by emphasizing the commonalities between whites and blacks, and by deliberately distancing himself from the most unpopular (to whites) black leaders, such as Jesse Jackson. This strategy succeeded as economic concerns became predominant over racial anxieties.

Other groups showing a distinctive affinity toward Clinton were quite different. The most wealthy Americans, male college graduates, those over forty-five years old, and suburban residents. In an insecure economy, these types of individuals lost faith in the economy under Bush and rightfully so. Clinton's focus on jobs and economic security allowed him to collect these crucial votes.

A common knock on the Democratic Party is that it is soft on crime. Clinton did much to break this boundary as he accepted and implemented the death penalty, making him far less vulnerable to the typical attack on Democratic candidates. Clearly, the Clinton team had a clear strategy to attract votes from certain demographics and it was a move that was largely successful. Clinton had a much broader appeal than his opponent. He held nearly all of those who reported a 1988 vote for the Democrat Michael Dukakis and won converts from previous Bush voters, as well as "recruits" amassed from his get out the vote effort.

Typically, incumbent elections are characterized as a referendum on the president's first term in office; this notion rang true in 1992 where Bill Clinton won rather easily due to the high level of frustration amongst the public about Bush's job performance. The presidential election of 1992 represented a rejection of the status quo as public frustration finally reached a boiling point to where they vehemently ousted the incumbent Republican. In short, it seems that voters have to feel a high level of pain with

regards to the current state of affairs in order to oust the incumbent candidate. In 1992, Americans had experienced high levels of economic pain with dubious hope for the future. That pain manifested itself in a massive Clinton victory.

The prospective element of the economy was most troubling for Bush; times were tough on Election Day and many had a much deeper fear of the future and the president failed to provide any reason to believe in his ability to right the ship. The voters confirmed this notion; by Election Day two-thirds of the electorate feared that the next generation of Americans would be no better off than the present (Pomper 1992). This election was dominated by prospective voting, but voters did not forget the previous four years. The damaged economy led citizens to actively call for a change and many cast their vote on which candidate could successfully bring about the necessary change. Clinton provided the electorate with the best plan for the future, and was the preferred candidate on this measure. 1992 was a rejection of the status quo, and illustrated the importance of future expectations amongst American voters. It can be said with confidence that a poor first term, coupled with feeble expectations for the future will almost certainly oust the incumbent candidate as it did in this election.

The election also confirmed that voters do not place much value on their current economic situation when casting a vote for president. Interestingly enough, in 1992 a majority of voters actually thought their own economic situation was either improved or unchanged over the past four years and might have voted for Bush to maintain that (Pomper 1992). The election proved that voters went beyond their personal circumstances in evaluating the candidates as Bush won less than one vote in five of the national plurality that disapproved of his economic management (Pomper 1992). The self-

centered question first asked by Reagan in 1980: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” Revealed that three fifths of those who saw themselves as better off voted for the incumbent; among those who saw themselves as worse off, the same proportion voted for Clinton (Pomper 1992). This is an example of purely retrospective voting. If voters merely cast their ballot based on their own financial situation, the numbers suggest that Bush would have won reelection convincingly. However, voters displayed a deeper concern for the state of national welfare. Eighty percent though economic conditions were either “not so good” or “poor” (Pomper 1992). Those who were pessimistic about the future of the national economy cast overwhelmingly strong votes against the incumbent.

GEORGE W. H. BUSH LACK OF STRATEGY AND FOCUS

In 1992, George W. H. Bush sought to paint Bill Clinton as untrustworthy but in such a serious recession, almost any other issue will be subordinated to the state of the economy. No amount of preaching that character or public morality should be a paramount concern of the voter made much headway for Bush. People did not forget Bush’s unfortunate statement at the 1988 Republican National Convention, “Read my lips: no new taxes.” He failed to follow through with this overly ambitious proposal and as a result, he was left vulnerable with the American public throughout the campaign on the very issue of trust with which he hoped to defeat Bill Clinton.

Mitch Daniels’, Bush’s political adviser summed up the campaign rather succinctly: “This campaign was very winnable until the late stages. We didn’t need the best strategy, or even the third or fourth best. All we needed was a strategy, period” (Wines 1992).

In 1992 Bush faced divided government and struggled to succeed with Congress. Bush went so far as to blame much of his troubles on the “gridlocked Congress” (Loevy 1992). As a whole, Republican Party lacked cohesiveness. There was no clear strategy and message for the 1992 campaign. Further troubling for Bush was that he did not gain the nomination unchallenged. Conservative columnist and television commentator Patrick Buchanan, although never expected to gain the nomination battled Bush en route to thirty seven percent of the vote while Bush gained the remaining fifty-three percent (Pomper 1992).

The election of 1992 followed great military triumphs, and Bush defined himself as a man with experience and ability to lead constantly citing his foreign policy record as proof. The USSR was no more, and the situation in the Persian Gulf had been resolved but instead of looking to the future and embracing change, Bush balked and allowed Clinton to define himself as the man of the future, an agent for change. This failure to embrace the change was evidenced in Bush’s rhetoric throughout the entire campaign, and although elections are probably not decided on debates and speeches, the words chosen by a candidate go far in the public’s perception of the candidate. Clinton captivated the growingly frustrated electorate by providing a vision for the future based on job growth and economic security; Bush attempted to extend the transition from the Cold War, Clinton argued that the era was over and he placed the focus on domestic issues and current problems facing the country. With this focus, Clinton was able to nullify Bush’s advantage in the realm of foreign policy since the problems facing the nation would not be solved by past successes in foreign policy.

Bush never adequately focused on the economy, and it was obvious. America was

in its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, and yet all Bush offered was for Americans to “put these times in perspective”. Yes, the largest peacetime economic expansion in history has been temporarily interrupted. But our economy is still over twice as large as our closest competitor (Denton 1994). By classifying the recession as a “temporary interruption”, Bush seemed to discount the experiences of many struggling Americans. His lack of focus and concern on the short-term situation was a monumental mistake in his campaigning. In the same 1992 State of the Union Address, Bush again delegitimized the economic problems as he described those concerned about the economy as being in a “mood”. This is a rather condescending choice of words as Bush is implying that the public’s evaluation of the economy is merely a passing emotion, a mood, and not really a reasonable assessment of the current state of affairs.

At the second presidential debate in 1992, Bush was unable to give a strong answer to a question on the minds of many voters, “How can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if have no experience in what’s ailing them” (Denton 1994). Bush was unable to respond effectively and this single moment, although it is merely a blip in the scheme of the entire campaign and election was very symbolic. The American electorate was growing surlier by the day, waiting anxiously for a leader with compassion and understanding of their struggle. Bush was seen as lacking both, while Clinton, the modest Southerner appeared to be fully invested in the well-being of the American people.

Instead of undermining the American public like President Bush, Clinton was able to empathize with the plight of the middle-class and able to define himself as one of the people and not above them. Following Bush’s State of the Union Address, he gained

only one point overall, and his approval rating on the economy received a mere four point boost, from twenty-four to twenty-eight percent (Denton 1994). Additionally, sixty-one percent of the people polled said the president's address had no effect on their willingness to vote for him (Denton 1994).

President Bush failed to adapt and address the most pressing issues facing the country as an astonishing forty-six percent of respondents reported that they had "not much of an idea" where he planned to lead the country (Denton 1994). As an incumbent candidate presiding over the worst economy since the Great Depression, bold action need to be taken. Clearly what Bush did in his first term did not help; but by failing to outline a course of action Bush opened the door for Bill Clinton, as the electorate's mood grew even surlier. By failing to address the concerns of the public, it was Bush who lost the trust of the public and as a result he would not be able to beat Clinton on that very issue.

Bush never assumed responsibility for the problems of the United States; instead he described the nation as the victim of a "global slowdown" felt by all. He did not outline a course of action; rather encouraged the people to wait it out, as the economy will eventually recover. Generally speaking, when things are not going well, people tend to lose patience, particularly when there seems to be no hope for change. In addition to blaming the nation's problems on the "global slowdown" Bush also cited the "gridlocked Democratic Congress" as a roadblock deterring him from enacting his policies. Historically speaking, voters do not place much weight on a divided congress, such as the one in 1992; rather they place the blame solely on the president, giving him leadership responsibility regardless of whether Congress is an ally.

2004 ELECTION

2000 ELECTION RESULTS

The United States 2000 presidential election was one of the tightest and most controversial presidential race in history. George W. Bush ultimately defeated Al Gore by the narrowest of margins. Despite not receiving a popular vote majority and a disputed electoral majority, Bush was ultimately victorious as decided by a five to four Supreme Court ruling. The highly contested nature of this race served as a lesson to the entire Bush team: every single vote matters. This notion was reflected in the 2004 election, as the Bush team was able to maintain their strong Republican base from 2000 while reaching out to other groups such as women and the evangelical Christian vote. The team knew that these were a few of the demographics where they needed to narrow the margin of defeat in order to ensure victory. The results of the 2000 election made Bush hungrier in 2004 and did not allow him to become complacent. Furthermore, the dynamics of the 2004 election had changed; Bush needed to gain more electoral votes than he did in 2000 to secure a victory and with this in mind the team, led by Chief of Staff, Karl Rove began strategizing well before the campaign on how to attract new votes in an extremely polarized partisan environment.

The effort for the Bush team began immediately following his victory in 2000. Rove concluded that Bush failed to attract a large chunk of evangelical Christians and faithful Catholics. Exit polls revealed a strong correlation between frequency of attendance at religious services and presidential choice, with those who attended religious services once per week or more voting overwhelmingly for Bush (Denton 2004). White Christians identifying themselves as evangelical or born again supported Bush over Kerry

by a seventy-eight to twenty-one percent margin (Denton 2004).

OVERVIEW OF 2004 CAMPAIGN EVENTS

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 largely shaped the election and will be discussed thoroughly throughout this section. The terrorist attacks fostered an overwhelming sense of patriotism, but it also stirred religious faith, as Americans needed to be strong to overcome such a difficult time, with many finding solace in religion. Bush was able to appeal to this demographic; he won ninety-one percent of voters who thought religious faith was the most important quality in a candidate and amongst those who listed “moral values” as the most important issue of the campaign, Bush won eighty percent (Denton 2004).

2004, much like the election of 1992, saw the Democratic Party scramble to choose a nominee worthy of challenging an incumbent Republican named Bush in a weak economy after a military conflict in the Middle East. The challenger was ultimately John Kerry, who was Senator from the commonwealth of Massachusetts. In a reelection campaign, the focus of the electorate tends to favor the record of the incumbent candidate, and unfortunately for Bush his record made him vulnerable. In the historic 2000 presidential election, one that saw Bush gain election despite not receiving a popular vote majority and a disputed electoral majority ultimately decided by a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling. Furthermore, early in his first term the economy entered a downturn, and eventually the nation endured its first decline in jobs over a presidential term since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The war in Iraq quickly escalated from an efficient military triumph to an outright chaotic insurgency with stories of suicide bombings, rapidly rising death counts of United States soldiers. The revelation of

horrifying human rights violations in the Abu Ghraib prison committed by American soldiers, and increasingly convincing evidence that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction. The culmination of these events and the subsequent media attention they garnered all posed a serious threat to Bush's reelection campaign.

September 11, 2001 conversely may have had the opposite effect for Bush's reelection hopes. The day that terrorists hijacked and crashed American airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 (Green 2011) innocent Americans completely reshaped American politics, including the 2004 campaign . Americans lived in fear of another devastating attack; and the 2004 election represented a choice between continuity and uncertainty with John Kerry. Would America be willing to trust a new President, lacking executive experience with a dicey voting record in foreign policy during such a tumultuous time in United States history? Ultimately, it was Bush who reigned supreme in 2004 and in the process he became the first president to win an outright majority of the United States popular vote.

The election of 2004 was completely shaped by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and it served as a rallying point for Bush. The atrocities of September 11 was a collective experience that all of America had endured together, with President Bush as the head of state. With September 11 so far at the forefront of the minds of voters, it became an impossible task for John Kerry to change the subject to domestic issues. The attacks on September 11, and Bush's handling of it came to define him in the eyes of the American public as a steady, tough leader who could be trusted to end the war on terror. The enormous faith that people had in the president around the issue of terror was able to offset doubts concerning his economic plan and agenda as well as other domestic issues

that Kerry hoped he could attack the president on.

In September of 2004, terrorism resurfaced, this time in the town of Beslan, North Ossetia, the autonomous republic in the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation. George Bush always had the upper hand with the public in his ability to handle terrorism, and the tragedy in Beslan reinforced the theme of the election: the War on Terror and national defense. In the three-day siege of a school, more than three hundred people, mostly children were killed (Giduck 2004). The attacks in Chechnya brought the fact of terrorism back to people's television screens in a very, real and chilling way. Hundreds of children were mercilessly slaughtered, and the story struck a chord with the voters, especially the women. In a statistical analysis conducted before and after the event, the level of importance that women attached to national security went up fifty percent. The terrorist attack may not have changed the perceptions of the candidates and their ability to lead, but it certainly impacted the level of importance they were placing on national security issues. The attacks occurred alongside the Republican National Convention, in which the main message of Bush and other Republican leaders was that terrorism was the central issue, and that Bush was better equipped to handle it. The attack reinforced the fear that had been created since the September 11 attacks, not to the same degree, but it did serve as a powerful reminder that America is vulnerable and this problem is not going to disappear.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the incumbent candidate usually has a distinct advantage due to the ability to control the agenda of national politics, establish foreign policy, the budget, and the multiple policies of the executive departments, nominate all federal judges and administrators, garner immediate publicity for any actions, and

provide benefits to favored areas and groups as W. Bush was able to do.

Bush thrived on his staunch and unrelenting mission to end the War on Terror through aggressive action that overshadowed the muddling economy. W. Bush controlled the message and theme of the campaign: defense at home and abroad further helping Bush's cause was that he faced little adversity en route to the nomination partially due to the fact that for the first time since 1954, the president and a majority of members in both houses of Congress were Republicans Bush received unprecedented support from his party (Nelson 2004).

2004 ELECTION ECONOMY

In 2004, George W. Bush made a concerted effort to avoid the same mistake his father made twelve years earlier. Despite mediocre job approval ratings and a predominant public opinion that the nation was on the "wrong track", Bush was able to shift the focus from the ills of the country to the uncertainty of the challenger, John Kerry. Bush, led by Vice President Dick Cheney relentlessly battered John Kerry. They blasted his voting record, his flip-flopping on national security issues, and they even went so far as to suggest that due to Kerry's weakness in foreign policy, terrorists would be even more encouraged to attack the United States. The ability to manipulate the message of the campaign was perhaps the deciding factor in this election. W. Bush learned from his father's mistakes in 1992, and was able to run the 2004 campaign on his own agenda: foreign policy and terrorism.

The economy was not as bad as it was in 1992, but it was far from flourishing. In fact during much of Bush's first term, the economy was in recession and Democrats eagerly reminded voters that Bush was the first president since Hoover to preside over a

net loss of jobs. The Democrats wanted to fight the election on the grounds of the economy, as it was perceived that Bush and the Republicans were weaker on the issue. The war on terror was fully in motion, and generally speaking, it is not wise to criticize the president's national security policies during time of war. Fully aware of this, the Democrats avoided the firestorm that may have ensued from questioning the president during a tumultuous time and instead attempted to direct voter attention to the state of the economy and its prospects.

There was still anxiety about the state of the economy in 2004, but despite the recession conditions were not nearly as bad as in 1992. Even though unemployment was higher than in 2000, it was still at modest levels; economic growth and personal income growth resumed in 2002; and lower interest rates helped millions who were buying or refinancing cars or houses. During September of the election year, the Dow Jones Industrial Average slipped to around 7,000, but as the election neared it regained another 1,500 points in the last month and a half of the campaign (Nelson 2004). Unlike his father, Bush actually appeared to make an effort to address the economy. He enacted a second round of tax-cuts to offset the economic retardation of the post-September 11 United States. He even went so far as to convene an "economic summit" to hear concerns from citizens.

History was in Bush's favor as well. No president seeking reelection in wartime has ever been defeated and no president had been defeated since 1932 unless he faced a primary challenger in his own party; Bush faced no such challenge as he enjoyed unprecedented levels of support among Republicans (Nelson 2004).

ADVERTISING AND ATTACKS

George W. Bush had fostered great public trust for Bush as the leader in the war on terror, an obstacle too much for Kerry to overcome. Incumbents hold a financial advantage, due to their name value and overwhelming list of donors. In 2004 Bush was able to delegate much of his resources to creating a negative perception of Kerry focused on his liberalness, propensity to raise taxes, and an overall lack of consistency on national security. Bush, on the other hand was a consistent, steady leader who had not changed his national security position from day one. The ability to develop a clear strategy and stick to it was one of the main factors that led to a Bush victory in 2004.

The Republican campaign was able to effectively shift the focus from Bush and his issues, to the uncertainty surrounding the Massachusetts Senator, John Kerry. The tactic was successful. According to exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool, Bush gained large advantages over Kerry among the third of the electorate that most wanted the president to be a “strong leader” with “clear stands on issues” (Ceaser 2005).

Kerry had an outstanding record as Lieutenant in the United States Navy during the Vietnam War. He was a decorated war veteran; the captain of a navy “swift boat”. He received the Bronze Star and the Silver Star for heroism, and three Purple Hearts for wounds suffered during combat (Nelson 2004). All of these credentials seemed to suggest that Kerry had the prerequisite experience necessary to guide America through a tumultuous time during the War on Terror. Despite Kerry’s impressive resume, he failed to instill overwhelming confidence in his abilities to lead, in large part due to his dubious voting record on War related issues. Kerry was a United States Senator, and with his legislative service came a twenty-year record of his votes that ultimately showed his

changing positions, inconsistencies, and political compromises especially those concerning national defense.

A group loosely tied to the Bush campaign who called themselves “Swift Vets and POWs for Truth” spent 13.8 million dollars in advertisements attacking Kerry’s Vietnam record while question his leadership capabilities (Nelson 2004). The advertisements featured veterans who stated they had served with and had direct contact with Kerry during the Vietnam War. The advertisements made four distinct allegations: Kerry had exaggerated his wounds to escape further duty; he did not actually save crew members’ lives under fire (he was awarded a Bronze Star for this); he had committed the wartime atrocity of shooting a wounded enemy soldier in the back; and he had undermined the morale of United States troops and may have lengthened the war by his criticism of it. Soon enough, it was concluded that the allegations made against Kerry were false. Investigations conducted by major newspapers and the Political Fact Check project at the University of Pennsylvania declared the charges lacked merit. Despite the inaccuracy of the claims, the advertisement had a noticeable impact on Kerry’s electability.

At the Democratic National Convention, Kerry openly challenged and questioned President Bush’s Iraq Policy. He opened his speech with the phrase, “I’m John Kerry and I am reporting for duty!” (Busch 2005). Kerry’s foreign policy experience was supposed to be one of his strengths and a potential centerpiece for his campaign; his record was supposed to give him credibility and allow the public to feel confident in his abilities as commander-in-chief of the most powerful army in the world. Instead, the Swift Vets for Truth advertisements dented his credibility as his standing in the polls declined sharply following the advertisement. An August survey conducted by NN/Gallup found that just

thirty percent doubted Kerry's honesty about his service in Vietnam. A month later that number had more than doubled, with a September CBS News/ *New York Times* survey reporting that forty-nine percent of respondents, including forty-one percent of Democrats, said they thought Kerry was "hiding something" about his Vietnam record, and another thirteen percent said he was "mostly lying" about his service (Nelson 2004). President Bush made sure to appropriately acknowledge Senator Kerry's military service, but he never explicitly came out and denied the claims put forth by the Swift Vets for Truth. The ads, despite lacking accuracy, garnered a lot media attention and really damaged Kerry's public perception.

In October of 2002, Kerry, along with sixty-seven senators voted for the bill authorizing the president to use force in Iraq (Purdum 2004). John Kerry had actively been outspoken in his opposition to war, and he even characterized the Iraq War as the "wrong one, in the wrong place, at the wrong time." Unfortunately, the attacks on Bush's handling of the war held little weight coming from a man who had previously voted for the war.

The criticism of Kerry's military record received far more airtime, but George Bush's military credentials also came under fire. Various news organizations investigated Bush's years of service in the National Guard and found grounds to doubt that he had properly completed his obligation. The issue peaked when it became the centerpiece of the CBS news program, *60 Minutes II*. The program claimed to have uncovered documents, signed by the commanding officer of Bush's Alabama National Guard Unit, stating that Bush had failed to show up for mandatory duties but was protected from the discipline protocol by the commander. However, the documents were proved to be

fraudulent and the story faded into oblivion but it did not go without leaving an impact.

Historically, a president's military record has proven to be largely irrelevant in to one's qualifications to be president. The president does not go into battle directly yet both candidates, especially John Kerry, stressed their military experience as an accurate barometer of how they would handle the current situation in national security.

Nevertheless, voters seemed to place a relatively large value to military credentials. The attacks both candidates endured on their record of service, raised questions of each man's integrity as each faced allegations of less than honorable behavior. John Kerry faced constant attacks, and struggled to gain credibility. Therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude that the attacks on his military credentials hurt him more than the incumbent, Bush. George W. Bush, if nothing else was steady. Steady in his beliefs on how to handle the current situation in Iraq and the global War on Terror and steady in his commitment to erasing the threat of terrorism at home or abroad. Kerry's military experience could have been a centerpiece of his campaign message; instead, national security as a whole came to be the issue that ultimately lost it for Kerry. The advertising played right into the Republican's hands as it shifted the focus of the election to national security; historically Republicans have fared well when foreign policy issues have risen in importance. This was the case in 1972, 1980, and 1984. The last Democrat to win the presidency was Bill Clinton in 1992, a year in which the election was focused on the economy.

JOHN KERRY'S IMAGE PROBLEM AND INABILITY TO RESPOND TO ATTACKS

John Kerry was a relatively unknown commodity, and as a result he was forced to spend a large portion of the campaign trying to introduce himself to the voters. Instead of running a feel-good campaign and making overly ambitious promises, George W. Bush

attacked the issues facing the nation head on; and talked very straight to the American people. Bush had credibility and Americans knew where he stood on issues, while John Kerry lacked credibility due to his inexperience in an executive position and his inability to construct a coherent, consistent message on his stance on one of the biggest issues facing the nation, the Iraq War. Kerry had to constantly fight to reassure the American public that he could succeed in the realm of national defense; the Swift Vets for Truth ads effectively curbed Kerry's momentum as he was forced to once again justify himself in the eyes of the American public. The issue of terrorism completely defined the election, much like the economy did in 1992, and not surprisingly the candidates who were victorious had coherent and consistent stances on how to approach and ultimately solve these problems.

John Kerry was battered to no end as the Bush team ran a very negative campaign while Kerry ran an overwhelmingly positive campaign relying on surveys which suggested the public has a popular distaste for "attack ads". That may be true, but in reality people tend to remember strong words, either negative or positive. As a relatively unknown commodity, especially in comparison to Bush, Kerry allowed the negative advertisements and attacks to largely define his character and campaign. He was unable to appropriately respond to attacks on his voting record and the Bush team successfully painted him as a "flip-flopper" with less than strong resolve, willing to change at any moment to earn a vote.

CONCLUSION

Initially, it was my contention that the economy is always the main determinant in the outcome of a presidential election. Through extensive research, it has become apparent that elections are much more than matters of the economy, although it still is always an important factor. The character of the candidates and the public's perception of them is just as important; a candidate who is able to create a positive image for himself is able to gain the necessary support in order to become president of the United States.

The previous positions held by the challengers must be considered in determining the disparity in result of the two elections: Clinton was the governor of Arkansas, an executive position. While Kerry was a Massachusetts Senator, a legislator, with a long series of roll call votes on difficult and complicated issues. Kerry's dubious voting record made him vulnerable and the Bush team painted him as a "flip-flopper" every chance they could. Clinton had no such a roll call of votes that W. H. Bush could attack. Personality wise, the two challengers could not have been more different. Clinton was a Southern man, who despite repeated attacks on his character was a rather likable fellow, and was able to appeal a wide spread contingent as he sought to introduce himself to the American People and establish himself as a loving family man. Kerry on the other hand, may have come off as an elitist, unable to understand the plight of the common man. Always a bit aloof, Kerry failed to generate considerable enthusiasm for his candidacy; running largely as an anti-Bush candidate. Clinton weathered attacks on his character while Kerry was relentlessly battered by the Bush team and allowed his image to be created for him: a liberal who was inconsistent on national security, willing to change his positions to suit the political moment. All of these factors outlined contributed to

Clinton's success and Kerry's lack thereof.

1992 and 2004 clearly illustrate the importance of the candidate's image and public perception. The losers in these two particular elections, Bush in 1992 and Kerry in 2004, allowed themselves to be defined by their opponents and were never able to run their campaign on their strengths. Additionally, Bush and Kerry were both perceived as out of touch, and perhaps even culturally challenged. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush on the other hand were both able to create positive images of themselves. Clinton had a troubled childhood and came from a middle-class family and his background resonated with much of the American public; he was compassionate and the public respected his genuine concern for the economic well being of America and its citizens. John Kerry was a wealthy Senator from Boston, and husband of the heir to the Heinz Ketchup fortune. , As a result he was perceived as elitist in large part due to his enormous personal wealth and even the manner in which he spoke contributed to that notion as his rhetoric was fraught with words well over the head of the average American.

George W. H. Bush won the election easily in 1988 in the midst of the Cold War. In times of international crisis, it seems that the American public is hesitant to change and take a leap of faith on a lesser-known commodity. President Bush proved himself a worthy commander-in-chief but the 1992 election was different as it took place in an interim period between the Cold War and September 11 and there was no major international crisis of note. It seems that in times of a global crisis such as the Cold War, Persian Gulf War, and the Iraq War, the qualities the American people seek in the character of the candidate place a heavier emphasis on steadiness and fortitude. However, in times where domestic issues are of greater importance the importance of those values

seems to be lessened; when times are tough, particularly in the economic realm, people want a president who is compassionate and able to empathize with their problems. This was precisely the case in 1992. Bill Clinton could not match President Bush's military credentials but he was able to provide what the incumbent could not: an understanding of the problems facing average Americans and a vision for the future. Bill Clinton represented change in a time when America could not afford to stay on the path that Bush was leading them on.

Success in these two elections was in large part determined by the adaptability of each candidate. In 1992, Bush offered no vision for the future. The Cold War was over and there were no international issues of note yet he remained fixated on his past achievements in foreign affairs. He was unable to respond and react to the growing issues at home, and it was his inability to adapt to the changing nature of the political landscape that really hurt his chance of success. He realized that his greatest strength was his experiences as commander-in-chief; , unfortunately that strength meant little in an election that was dominated by domestic issues. The election reinforced one of the oldest themes in all of literature;; how rapidly the mighty can fall. In 1992 foreign policy issues and public concerns about them played the smallest role in any American presidential election since 1936. The Cold War had dominated international politics for nearly half a century, but 1988 was the last Cold War election, and 1992 represented the need for a new perspective.

At the risk of sounding cliché, these two elections illustrate that timing is everything. The end of the Cold War was a great accomplishment for the Bush administration; unfortunately it came a bit too soon. As history has shown, incumbent

candidates rarely are defeated during times of war. The timing of major events had a significant impact on Bush's reelection chances in 2004. The events of September 11, 2001 and the Chechen terrorist attacks in 2004 played directly to President Bush's strengths. The entire campaign was shaped by 9/11, and the timing of the Chechen terrorist attacks a mere two months before the election served as a positive reinforcement for the Bush campaign that the terrorism is still a major threat, and an experienced leader will serve the United States well during this troubling time.

I have learned that United States presidential elections are very complex matters. An election is not decided by one factor; they are a culmination of events including but not limited to: war, the economy, candidate's rhetoric, and other various domestic and social issues. It is the culmination of these events along with the public's evaluation of the character of the candidate and their assessment of that candidate to lead and offer hope in resolving the issues of the election whether it is the economy in 1992 or the War on Terror in 2004. The point is that presidential elections are not determined exclusively by one event and incumbency is not always an advantage. A candidate must be able to demonstrate to the electorate that he is dedicated to the issues at hand by offering a coherent vision and the necessary steps needed to solve the given issue. At the end of the day, the American voter does not cast his or her vote solely on political advertisements, speeches, or the candidates' past record. Rather one considers a multitude of factors, and one of the most underestimated factors is the overall likability of the candidate. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were successful due in large part to their ability to formulate a clear strategy and vision for the future. While George H. W. Bush and John Kerry had no coherent strategy or message, and it is safe to say that they were far less likable than

both Clinton and W. Bush.

George W. H. Bush's successes in foreign policy and his meteoric rise in approval ratings led to a lack of commitment on the issues of the economy, as it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that a president with such great popularity would cruise to another victory in 1992. He never fully assumed blame for the problems ailing the nation., Instead, he focused on attacking Clinton's character and integrity; he sought to paint Clinton as an untrustworthy, draft dodging, marijuana smoking governor lacking the requisite character to be president of the United States. Ironically enough, it was Bush who lacked credibility. He failed to follow through with his lofty promise of no new taxes at the 1988

Republican National Convention and chose to blame the gridlocked nature of congress for the lack of success in carrying out his economic proposals. Instead of offering consolation to those in serious need, he characterized the growing public frustration with the economy as a mood, and reminded everybody that the United States was still the most powerful economy in the world. All of this may have been true, but as 2004 illustrated, the candidate must at the very least, be perceived by the public as genuinely concerned with the most pressing issues, and in 1992 all Bush could suggest was for Americans to remain patient and to keep everything in perspective.

George W. Bush learned from his father's mistakes in 1992. Twelve years prior, his father had broken his promise of no new taxes, angered his own party, and paid little heed to mounting economic difficulties. In 2004, George W. Bush enjoyed unprecedented support amongst his own party; the midterm elections were a telltale sign of things to come in 2004. It was only the second time since 1934 that a president's party had gained

House seats in a midterm election, and the first time since 1934 that a president's party had gained seats in both houses (Nelson 2004). President Bush in 1990, had a far more confrontational relationship with Congress and his party was in a deep minority position in the House, with just one hundred and seventy-three Republican members amounted to approximately forty-percent. Additionally, Bush Ssr. had the second lowest president success score in Congress as recorded by *Congressional Quarterly*, at forty-eight percent. George W. Bush did not alienate members in his party like his father did in 1992, and it certainly helped him secure the presidency and at the very least it did not hurt him as it did his father in 1992 (Pomper 1993).

In the two elections, both incumbent candidates had strong leadership ratings. At the conclusion of the War in March 1991, eighty-six percent of respondents concluded that Bush had strong qualities of leadership (Pomper 1993). Similarly, in 2004, according to exit polls the voters preferred Bush to Kerry as a leader. The 2004 election in the end became more about leadership abilities than specific policymaking; 1992 was precisely the opposite.

In conclusion, it is clear that presidential reelections are much more than referendums on the state of the economy. In any given election, the main issues fluctuate from the economy to national defense or something else entirely. The point is that there is not one single issue that dominates the outcome every election. Rather it is a multitude of factors and how well the candidate responds to the climate of the election. The climate of the election refers to external events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Chechen Islamic terrorist attacks that shaped the election of 2004 and in 1992, the election was dominated by the economy and foreign affairs were much less of a concern.

It is the candidate's ability to adapt to the fluctuating agenda of issues that leads to success on Election Day. In the two elections studied, the two men who came out victorious were able to strategize and formulate a campaign message involving the most paramount issues of the respective campaigns. The public must have a certain level of trust in a candidate to elect him to president and even more so to oust an incumbent from office.

When times are bad, particularly economically the mood of the public deteriorates and the approval of the president falls along with it. This was the case in 1992, and in 2004 the economy was not in great shape but it was nowhere near as poor as it had been in 1992. However, the election of 1992 did not occur in the midst of any international crisis while 2004 was casted entirely under the shadow of the fear of another terrorist attack on American soil. In 1992, the public was concerned with the state of the national economy and although many voters were not necessarily worse off than they were before the president took office there was little hope for the future. In 2004, the economy was less of a concern as the public was more concerned with the safety and security of the United States. These are obviously two very different concerns and the outcome of the elections reflected the variance in issues. In 2004, the election occurred at a very tumultuous time in the international realm and voters needed to be extremely dissatisfied with George W. Bush in order to oust him during a time filled with great trepidation. John Kerry could not overcome the public's fear, as they opted for the known, steadier George W. Bush who had been the leader during September 11. George W. Bush defined himself in his first term as a man of great conviction; one may not necessarily like the president and he may not be the most intellectually savvy candidate, but the electorate

certainly knew where he stood due to his unrelenting focus on national defense and his dedication to ending the War on Terror. In an election day dominated by a fear of an impending attack on the United States, John Kerry could not rally enough trust in his ability to lead the country out of an international crisis. Kerry had the military credentials, and was certainly bright enough to serve as president of the United States of America, but he lacked the trust of the public, which ultimately led to his defeat.

1992 confirmed the public's distrust in George H. W. Bush's ability to dig America out of the economic hole Bush had put them in. It was the biggest issue facing the nation, and the president appeared disinterested in it altogether. Bill Clinton was not without his own faults but he displayed time and time again his commitment to fixing the economy, and the public responded in an overwhelmingly positive manner by electing him. Bush's lack of commitment in 1992 directly contrasts his son's dedication to national defense in 2004. Taking nothing away from Bill Clinton, it seems that the 1992 election had more to do with Bush's failures as president and the lack of confidence going forward, than Clinton's ability. While the 2004 election reaffirmed the public's faith in George W. Bush as a leader and rejected the challenger John Kerry, electing stability and continuity over a question mark.

Bill Clinton had an advantage over John Kerry in his ability to relate to the average American. Bill Clinton had been called a lot of things: a slick, draft dodging, cheater but was never accused of being elitist and out of touch like the challenger in 2004, John Kerry. One cannot dispute the intellectual capacity of Kerry and he had a great military record in Vietnam, but he was not nearly as likable as Bill Clinton or George W. Bush. Despite all of the forecasting models accounting for the economy,

approval ratings, and other factors, one of the simplest factors that seemed to swing the 1992 and 2004 elections was the overall like-ability of each candidate. The two losers, Bush and Kerry were often times described as elitist and out of touch and were far less likable than their opponents.

The 1992 and 2004 elections reveal a lot about the nature of presidential elections. One, the candidate who is able to run on his preferred criteria and does not allow himself to be defined by his opponent has a much better opportunity for success. Secondly, the candidate must appeal to the most pressing public concern. If a candidate is seen as lacking interest or dedication to the most paramount issue, the public feels more comfortable in electing the candidate who shares their concern. Trust is a huge factor. In 1992, Bush was never trusted as the best man to handle the economy much like Kerry in 2004 with regards to the war on terror. Furthermore, the amount of public dissatisfaction with the incumbent candidate must be overwhelming in order to oust the known commodity and take a leap of faith on a less experienced, challenger candidate. A challenger can gain public credibility by appealing to the most pressing issue, running a clean campaign focused on his agenda and plan, and not simply attacking and smearing the opponent. Presidential elections are largely determined by how well a candidate can impose their will on their opponent, they are contests of momentum; as a candidate must be able to weather attacks on their character, policies, or past history and respond. Advertising plays a significant role in shaping the public perception of a candidate, but at the end of the day a candidate must be able to define themselves and their mission as president. Bill Clinton was able to do that. John Kerry was not.

The first term of the incumbent candidate has a great effect on the public's

evaluation of the incumbent's ability to lead in the future. George H. W. Bush displayed a great ability as commander-in-chief but those experiences in the Persian Gulf offered no solace to an electorate completely absorbed by the state of the economy and what action must be done to right the ship. George W. Bush defined himself as rock steady, side by side with American's during the defining moment of September 11. He was a fearless military leader, and since it was an election defined by national defense, the public was able to look past some of his economic and domestic deficiencies as they were focused on the larger, more paramount issue of national security. A candidate must appeal to the need of the electorate, regardless of the issue. Each candidate has strengths and weaknesses in any given realm, like Bush in 1992 on the economy and Kerry in 2004 on national defense. These two men were unsuccessful because the elections were run on issues in which their opponents held a serious advantage. The timing of external events influences the nature of the campaign, and for Bush Sr. and Kerry the issues at stake were too large for them to attempt to shift the focus to an area in which they were stronger than their opponent.

Presidential elections will continue to be analyzed and forecasted, but sometimes an election is quite simple. 1992 served as a referendum on President Bush's first term in office, which was an overwhelming disaster, and as a result he was defeated easily. 2004 was a prospective election and the public opted for the steadiness of the status quo during an unstable time in international politics. Each election is unique with its own set of characters and issues, but ultimately they are determined by the ability of a candidate to establish themselves as a trustworthy leader, fit for the immense responsibilities of the President of the United States of America.

In this thesis, I have proved that the winner of presidential election is largely decided by their ability to appeal to the paramount issue of the given campaign. In 1992, Bill Clinton was able to shift the focus from his alleged character issues by constantly reminding the American electorate through his speech and television appearances that the United States could not afford to spend another four years with George Bush in the White House. Bill Clinton appealed as the necessary agent of change, while George W. Bush in 2004 did just the opposite. In the tumultuous landscape that shaped the 2004 election Bush was able to shift the attention to his abilities as commander-in-chief while simultaneously raising questions about John Kerry's capacity to lead America through a trying time in history.

This thesis has also proved that incumbency does not necessarily help a president's chances of gaining reelection. For George H. W. Bush in 1992, it did just the opposite. His strength was in foreign policy, and with no international crisis of note, Bush was not able to attack Clinton for being soft on national defense (a common knock against Democrats). Bush did not have his eyes on the future and by focusing on his past achievements in foreign policy, the voters were reminded of what Bush had not done in his first term as well as what he had accomplished.

The opposite can be said for George W. Bush. His first term, despite economic troubles, was overshadowed by his determination to keep America safe and he proved his will to succeed in his first term as the leader of the United States during a turbulent time. Much like George H. W. Bush could not attack Clinton on foreign policy in 1992, John Kerry could not focus the 2004 election on issues of his strength: domestic policy particularly concerning the economy. In a time of international crisis, any other issue will

largely be subordinated and John Kerry was not able to adjust.

I have proved that American's tend to be hesitant to change, unless they have experienced great pain such as the economic strife in the early 1990s that preceded the 1992 election. The fear of the status quo must trump that of the fear of change represented by the challenger; this was the case in 1992 with Bill Clinton winning and the opposite was true in 2004 with George W. Bush gaining reelection. Ultimately, voters are smart and will not elect a man simply because he represents change. No, the challenger must be a viable option beyond the element of change. He must instill confidence in his ability to lead and this is accomplished by appealing to the concerns of the voters and a challenger who is able to do so will most likely be successful.

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