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WINNING THE PRESIDENCY:
THE VISION AND VALUES APPROACH

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This paper will deal with the presidential election contest. It will suggest, based on research on the presidential election process, that the presidential candidate who best articulates, verbally and symbolically, the visions and values most traditional to American society, of the broadest section of the middle class, will win the presidential election.

Voting in a presidential election is influenced by numerous forces. The visions and values concept, to be more fully discussed below, appears to have emerged, however, over the past two decades as a decisive element in the presidential contest.

The Visions and Values Concept

The visions aspect of the visions and values concept relates to a set of views concerning the American past, present, and future. Central here is the vision of the economic future most in line with the view of America as an opportunity providing society, as a society where individual effort and ability is most rewarded, and where government plays a fair but limited role in providing broad based programs that lead to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. 1

A second part of the vision aspect deals with foreign affairs. Here the basic vision is of a strong and confident America, standing for democratic and human values, standing up to the Soviet adversary, being militarily prepared and strong, supporting our allies, maintaining our honor, and working for peace.

A third part of the vision aspect centers on the concept that America is an optimistic society where challenges are met and problems solved. ²

The President is expected to take the leadership role in mobilizing the resources, inventiveness, and technological orientation of America to help bring about the resolution of most problems - economic, environmental, medical, social, military, foreign related, etc. - facing the nation.

The values aspect of the visions and values concept is in many respects related and interwoven to the visions aspect. Operationalizing value terms requires translation of these values into issues. These issues in turn are associated with visions of the greater American society. Conversely, the expression of these visions leads to their becoming a set of value references for the American nation.

(1) An initial part of the values aspect is the traditional American regard for strongly held but vague, in specific or coherent definition, views on family values, neighborhood and community integrity, the work ethic, religious beliefs, and respect for law and order.

(2) Another part of the value aspect is the expression of support for learning and education, scientific and technological progress, assistance for those truly unable to care for themselves, and broad based and general democratic and civil liberty concepts in the American society.

(3) On another level of the value aspect one finds among the middle class a serious concern for the values of American society that seem to have been reversed after coming under challenge from dissident or disaffected elements of the population. ³ Here one may find a repetition of previously expressed values stated in a rather negative context - dislike of quotas; anger at welfare program cheating; hostility to governmental programs that appear to encourage

promissiveness; concern for decline of educational standards and lack of respect for teachers; anxiety over changing family structure, religious beliefs, and neighborhood stability; etc.

(4) One also observes negative feelings towards the perceived violation of a set of economic and work oriented values - overtaxation, inflation, lack of willingness to accept unaccustomed work, non-productive government work programs, excessive union demands, etc.

The Political Basis of the Vision and Value Concept

Presidential campaigns that have stressed the vision of a greater America and superior values of the American society are not new to American presidential elections. They are a tried and tested staple of presidential campaigning. However, what is most significant is that these themes are being more frequently used and have become increasingly important in determining election outcomes over the past two decades.

The Decomposition of Political Parties

There are a number of factors that have made the vision style campaign so crucial. A first and primary factor is the decline of traditional party support and organizational structures brought about by the decomposition of the political parties. ⁴ The American voter is "less attached" today to a political party and is less likely to be influenced by party loyalty in his or her voting choice. Further, candidates for office are less dependent on the party for securing nominations to office or running a campaign. Candidates can now use the primary system to bypass the party leadership in obtaining nomination to office and then establish their own campaign organization fundraising efforts, and polling and media operations.

The basic causes of the decomposition of the political parties are the advent of mass media communications, the growth of new campaign technologies, the reforms of the political party system intended to "open up" and increase participation in the political process, the changing nature of campaign financing, and the development of a more educated suburbanized and independent-minded voting population. All of these elements have contributed to the rising significance of a visions and value theme campaign as a need arose to fill the vacuum of power left by decomposition of the party system.

Breakup of the New Deal Coalition

A second factor that has enhanced the importance of an effective - especially in symbolic terms - visions and values campaign in the breakup of the Democratic new deal coalition. The blue collar working class, the base of the new deal coalition, has become economically better off and is no longer very supportive of "interventionist economic and welfare policies." They do not find that these policies are of benefit to them. The northern white ethnics, another vital element in the coalition, have been alienated by a focus on the problems of minorities and poverty. The south has become a two-party competitive region in national elections. Further, young voters, with no "personal experiences" of the depression and growing up in an "age of affluence," do not view party politics "along class lines" as their parents generation was likely to do. They have shown themselves to be equally or more supportive of Republican party candidates than of Democratic party candidates.

In sum, substantial elements of the new deal coalition have moved more to the conservatively shifting center of the political spectrum. They have come closer to the more traditional vision of "classic economic liberalism" as their economic position has bettered. The Democratic Party has, at the same time maintained and even increased its emphasis on the poor, minorities and the disadvantaged. Thus the vision of much of the new deal coalition has shifted from the vision held and expressed by much of the activist elements in the Democratic Party. Further, the personal values - social, family, work, neighborhood - of many elements of the old coalition has grown more traditional. This is at odds with the more permissive views and attitudes championed by the liberal activist elements of the party.

The Ticket Splitter

A third factor in the growing significance of a visions and values campaign is the advent of the ticket splitter. This person is basically a Republican or Democrat who "splits off to vote for a candidate of another party." ⁶ The ticket splitter is a new kind of "independent" voter. He or she is most likely to be more politically active and aware than the classical independent who does not want to be committed to a party. The ticket splitter is also likely to be young, middle income, professional, and mass media oriented. An effective manner of reaching the contemporary ticket splitter is through modern mass media information and communications systems - direct mail, television, radio, etc.

The ticket splitters are very receptive to a visions and values campaign. They are more media influenced - a fertile arena for the transmission of symbolic vision and value messages; they are younger and broadly middle class - making them more perceptive to a visions and values oriented campaign; and they are not strongly committed to a political party label - making them more likely to vote for the presidential candidate who better reflects the vision and value themes.

The Changing Nature of Party Identification

A fourth factor that has helped increase the importance of a vision and value campaign is the changing nature of party identification. We no longer view party identification as a fixed, stable, and external force. Today, we are more likely to see party identification as being "subject to change as individual preferences change" and as party positions on crucial issues change. We can say that when a party "consistently" takes positions on issues favored by a voter the strength of that voter's identification with the party will increase. This greater degree of identification means that the voter will "adopt" other positions that the party favors and see the party as advocating policies that he or she tends to favor. This leads to a "continued strengthening" of party identification, a more steady set of preferences on issues, and a better and clearer understanding of the difference between parties.

Party identification can be seen as a slowly building process, subject to change as the parties themselves change, based on the "accumulated evaluations" of the party positions, the political campaigns, the statements and actions of party leaders, and the conduct in office of the elected officials of the party.

A vision and value theme campaign blends well with what is suggested to be the manner in which party identification changes. The vision and value campaigns - constantly reinforcing a set of views and attitudes - have provided a basic element from which to build a new party identification. Further, the realignment of the electorate that we may be currently observing can be said to result, in part, from the impact of vision and value campaigns, various party positions, and party leadership actions on the electorate as it forms a new party identification. The shifting alignment that we may be seeing is leaving the Democratic party with a coalition of liberals, minorities, and the disadvantaged. The Republican party is building its coalition from the conservatives, the upper class, and the working class - middle class Americans.

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Mass Media Information and Communications and New Campaign Techniques and Technologies

A fifth factor that has made the vision and value campaign crucial is the development of the mass media as an instrument of political information and communications and the development of new campaign techniques and technologies that have changed the format of the modern campaign.

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The media, communications, polling, and marketing specialist has come to play a vital role in a presidential election campaign because of the realization that the "key to a persuasive campaign lies in contriving the setting" of the campaign to the candidates advantage. This effort is as important as any that directly attempts to change the electorates voting decisions. The 1984 Regan election effort is an excellent example and demonstrates the effectiveness of contriving the setting of a campaign to stress the vision and value theme.

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The task of gaining proper media exposure and running an effective media campaign has become highly technical. Today, a company of specialists including public relations people, advertising experts, film-makers, television producers, marketing experts, pollsters, computer experts, etc. - "market" candidates by the use of "creative television" techniques, extensive attitudinal research, and sophisticated polling methods.

Most of the electorate receives much of its information about the campaign and also receives much of its overall news from television. Further, they are more likely to believe what they see than what they read. Awareness of the nature of the electorate's "exposure" and belief system aids the media and marketing experts in the targeting of their campaign audience.

One element of the campaign audience, a smaller segment, is more print oriented and can better be reached by direct mailings, position papers, and issue statements and discussions. This element of the electorate can be effectively addressed on a vision and value campaign by the use of the printed media mentioned above. They are not as easily persuaded as the electronic media oriented segment, to be discussed below, but can be strongly supportive of a vision and value theme campaign that is well articulated and presented in a printed content.

A second element of the campaign audience is the electronic media oriented
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segment. This group depends upon the electric mass media - primarily television, to a lesser degree radio - for their information about the world around them. The voters in this group belong to "a vast audience built primarily by
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commercial television and radio for purposes of marketing products." They

come from all social, economic, and geographic backgrounds and share the characteristic of relative isolation from most other media. Further, they have "more experience in evaluating television, film, and recording personalities"¹³ than in understanding and making judgments on difficult, complex, and ambiguous public issues.

The electric media oriented element of the campaign audience is especially susceptible to a vision and value theme campaign that is well constructed in symbolic and visual content. They are supportive of the candidate who in personal and political expression best represents the view, attitudes, and beliefs that most fully describe the past successes, current strengths, and future hopes of the American society.

A campaign that stresses unresolved problems and the failings of the other candidate does not usually work unless conditions are bad. Even during bad times this type of campaign can best succeed when using mass media, the solutions offered are within the context of the traditional American vision of successfully meeting challenges and the traditional American value system of individual, family, and community effort.

A standard issues campaign can frequently become overly complex and its effectiveness, even using television, lost in a flow of competitive claims, statements, clarifications, and opinions. However, an issues campaign that is rooted in the visions and the values of the American society is more adaptable to mass media communications. It is far simpler to present to the electorate issues in symbolic terms of economic opportunity and stability through individual effort or governmental assistance that leads to self-sufficiency.

The electronic mass media serves as the basic information and communication tool for a visions and values theme campaign. The television has become for many the primary source of awareness of the world around them. Its effective use in a campaign can have a dramatic impact on an election outcome.

Suburbanization

Suburbanization is a sixth and final factor promoting the increasing use of a vision and value style campaign.

The suburbanization process has weakened traditional party structures and loyalties. Further, the American suburb is a center of middle class life and is mass media oriented. The suburbs, emerging in the post World War II era, are symbols of growth and affluence of contemporary American Society. A campaign that stresses the vision of an America as a nation of opportunity, growth, and prosperity and the values of an America that is oriented to family and community is likely to have a strong appeal to the suburban electorate.

Results and Impact of the Modern Visions and Values Campaign

The results of presidential elections since 1960 have shown that the candidate who could most effectively state - in words and in symbols - the visions and values of the ever moving, centerist, middle class element has won the presidency.

President John Kennedy won in 1960 with his call for greatness and individual effort; President Lyndon Johnson won in 1964 with his campaign for justice and fairness; President Nixon was victorious in 1968 with his call for peace with honor in Vietnam and his campaign against liberal "social issue positions"; President Nixon won reelection in 1972 again with a campaign centered on attacking overly liberal social policy and achieving an honorable peace in Vietnam; President Jimmy Carter won in 1976 with his call for honesty in government and his stress on the greatness of the American people; President Ronald Regan won election in 1980 with his campaign against big government and excessive social welfare spending and his call for rewarding individual initiative and attaining economic betterment; Regan won reelection in 1984 stressing basically the same themes and adding his vision of America as an opportunity providing society.

Those candidates who did not run a centerist, middle class campaign stressing vision and value concepts effectively - Goldwater in 1964, McGovern in 1968, Carter in 1980, Mondale in 1984 - were badly defeated.

What has seemed to be most effective and successful as a campaign orientation is an appeal to the electorate based on older, more traditional economic and social visions and values. The ever shifting center has moved right and becomes much more conservative. Prosperity has altered the concerns of the middle class to wanting less government and less taxes. The new deal stress on government intervention, the great society effort to aid specific groups of minorities and the disadvantaged, and the liberal emphasis on greater freedom and open expression on personal and social affairs has lost much of its support among significant segments of the electorate.

The Democratic Party has lost the most support and the Republican Party has gained much of that support from the shift of the electorate to a more conservative and traditional vision and value orientation. Further, there has been a strong movement away from support for "government power and from trust in government." This too has had a negative impact on the Democratic Party. The shift is especially critical among blue-collar, lower income people. The element in American society "that could have been expected to benefit from and support government the most."

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The Democratic Party faces other serious problems. Much of the active leadership of the Democratic Party stands far to the left of most of the registered Democratic voters - on social issues, on minority concerns, on welfare policy, on ideology, etc. In fact, the Republican Party leadership is closer to the issue positions of the Democratic voters than are the Democratic Party leaders.

The Democratic Party to avoid ongoing defeats in presidential elections and avoid becoming the new minority party, barring a severe mismanagement of the economy by the Republicans similar to what occurred in the 1920's and 1930's, must find a way to bridge the gap between the social, racial, economic, welfare liberalism of their elite leadership and the more conservative attitudes of the electorate on these issues. If the Democrats cannot accomplish this task the Republican party, by consistently appealing to the more traditional visions and values of the American electorate will replace them as the majority party in America.

FOOTNOTES

1. Economic issues have been and still appear to be the most telling factor in presidential election outcomes. For further discussion, see Richard Watson, The Presidential Contest (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984), pp. 89-91; Henry Plotkin, "Issues in the Presidential Campaign," in The Election of 1980, ed. Gerald Pomper (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1981), pp. 38-64; and Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, The Real Majority (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1971), pp. 40-44.
2. Ben Wattenberg using massive data compiled from various public opinion attitudinal surveys and the U.S. Bureau of the Census suggests that the American people are basically optimistic, positively oriented, and as a whole economically well off. Further, he suggests that the American people see the nation and its institutions as capable of solving its problems, meeting its challenges, and effectively coping with adversity. For further elaboration see Ben Wattenberg, The Good News is that the Bad News is Wrong (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984) and Ben Wattenberg, The Real America (New York: Putnam, 1976).
3. Wattenberg blames the press and a disaffected, politically active and vocal elite of the left and the right for creating so negative and critical an impression of American life and its value structure. Wattenberg, The Good News and Wattenberg, The Real America.
4. For a fuller discussion of the concept of the decomposition of the political parties, see James Clotfelter and Charles Prysby, Political Choices (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), Chapters 1 and 8 and Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970).
5. For more discussion on the breakup of the new deal coalition, see Clotfelter and Prysby, Political Choices, Chapters 1 and 8; Herbert Asher, Presidential Elections and American Politics (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1984), Chapter 11; and Walter Dean Buehnam, The Current Crisis In American Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), Chapter 9.
6. For further discussion on the ticket splitters, see Walter DeVaries and V. Lance Tarrance, The Ticket Splitter: A New Force in American Politics, (Grand Rapid Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972) and William Crotty, American Parties In Decline (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), Chapter 2.
7. Material on the changing nature of party identification taken from Charles Franklin and John Jackson, "The Dynamics of Party Identification," American Political Science Review, Vol. 77; No. 4 (December 1983), pp. 968-970.

8. For further discussion on the realignment of the electorate, see Burnham, Critical Elections, pp. 158-166 and Joshua H. Sandman, "The Reemerging Rule of the Political Party: Campaign '84 and Beyond," Presidential Studies Quarterly, Vol. XIV; No. 4, (Fall 1984), pp. 517-518.
9. Material on mass media information and communications and new campaign techniques and technologies taken from Dan Nimmo, The Political Persuaders: The Techniques of Modern Election Campaigns (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), Chapter 4. For further discussion on the above topic, see Stephan Wayne, The Road to the White House: The Politics of Presidential Elections (New York: St. Martins, 1984), Chapters 6, 7, and 8 and James Brown and Philip Seib, The Act of Politics, Electoral Strategies and Campaign Management (Port Washington, N.Y.: Alfred Publishing, 1976).
10. For further elaboration on the 1984 Reagan campaign's use of the electronic mass media to project the symbols of a vision and value campaign theme, see Fay Joyce, "2 Approaches to a Candidate's Image: Showing the Message or Speaking It," New York Times, November 1, 1984, Section D, p. 28.
11. For a discussion on how the 1984 Reagan election effort effectively the electronic media oriented segment of the electorate, see Ibid.
12. Nimmo, The Political Persuaders, p. 118.
13. Ibid.
14. Burnham, The Current Crisis, p. 295. In Chapter 9 of The Current Crisis, Burnham further discusses a number of the themes addressed in the last section of this paper.
15. Ibid., pp. 295-296.