A fundamental strategy of American political campaigns is “agenda control” -- steering voters in the direction of issues on which one candidate enjoys a relative advantage. Long before they reach voting-age, most Americans are socialized to associate each party with a set of interests and, by inference, with a set of issues or problems on which they will deliver (Petrocik, 1996; Iyengar et al., 1997). In general, “Republican-owned” issues include national security, defense, and the conduct of foreign affairs. That is, the public typically acknowledges that Republicans are better able to deal with these issues than Democrats. Conversely, voters favor Democrats on most “quality of life” issues including job and income security, healthcare, and social welfare. Of course, there are other issues, e.g., balancing the budget and strengthening the public schools, on which the public rates the two parties evenly. As shown in Figure 1, California voters prefer Republicans on terrorism and Democrats on healthcare, while rating the two parties pretty evenly on the economy.
Because the average voter focuses on only one or two issues when formulating their voting choices, candidates are motivated to put forward a limited number of issues thought to have broad appeal. In 2004, the Bush campaign will inevitably focus on terrorism and threats to national security (issues on which voters prefer him over Kerry by a margin of 2:1), while Kerry will prefer to address job losses and social security (issues on which he enjoys a substantial edge over Bush). In this sense, the typical experience in American political campaigns is that candidates talk past each other (Simon, 2002).

As we head into the 2004 presidential election, it appears that the state of the American economy (e.g., the stagnation in job creation, large budget deficits and uncertain stock market performance) has overshadowed the conduct of U.S foreign policy and the war in Iraq as the issue of the moment. In a recent survey, Stanford researchers asked a representative sample of Californians the following question: “Some people feel
the war on terrorism is the most important priority right now, and domestic issues such as the economy and healthcare are secondary. Others feel that domestic issues should come before the war on terrorism. How do you feel about this?” As shown in Figure 2, a clear plurality of Californians gave the edge to domestic issues.

**Figure 2: War on Terror vs. Domestic Issues**
(Representative Sample of 576 California Likely Voters, March 2004)

Given the reputations of the parties, the current issue agenda represents a liability for President Bush. One predictable response of the Bush campaign will be to reframe the campaign in terms of terrorism and national security. In fact, the first round of Republican television ads, released on March 5, made frequent references to September 11 and the President’s “leadership” in dealing with terrorist threats.

A second strategy of agenda control, should efforts to substitute one generic issue for another fail, is to introduce so-called wedge issues into campaign discourse. In fact, the introduction of wedge issues is generally a tacit acknowledgment that the sponsoring
candidate is losing the debate on generic issues. Wedge issues pit one set of group interests against another. The typical wedge appeal targets a dominant in-group, by representing some threat or cost associated with the activities of an out-group.

In recent years, the most politically charged group cleavage has been ethnicity and the typical wedge appeal is designed to pit white voters against either Hispanics or African-Americans. The appeal to group identity can be either explicit -- as in the case of immigration or affirmative action -- or implicit, as in the case of crime and drug abuse. In practice, the politicization of ethnicity is associated with Republican candidates, who hope to exploit their advantage as the party of law and order, social control and “traditional” values.¹

The two major cases of wedge issues in recent presidential campaigns include illegal immigration (by the Dole campaign) in 1996 and crime in 1988 (the notorious “Willie Horton” ad). Given the one-sided nature of the 1996 election, it is unlikely that the immigration issue had any role in the outcome. In August 1988, however, the use of the racially-coded appeal² -- which went unchallenged by the Dukakis campaign -- is thought to have played a major role in the George H. Bush campaign’s ability to overcome what was then a significant deficit in the polls.

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¹ There are exceptions to this pattern. Most recently, the Democratic National Committee aired an ad in 2000 highlighting the brutal murder of James Byrd and then-Governor Bush’s opposition to hate crime legislation.
² The Horton ad was in fact produced by an independent group (National Security Political Action Committee) with loose ties to the Bush-Quayle campaign. “Revolving Door,” a version of the original without reference to Horton, was produced and distributed by the Bush-Quayle campaign.
Although wedge issues have played a relatively minor role in recent presidential campaigns, they have proven pivotal in several major state-level races. In 1990, Conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms was locked in a close race with Democrat Harvey Gantt (the African-American Mayor of Charlotte). During the closing days of the race, Helms released an ad opposing the use of affirmative action in employment decisions. This “white hands” ad is credited with producing a significant surge in Helms support.

Wedge Issues in the 1994 California Gubernatorial Election

The one previous case in which political scientists have accumulated systematic evidence concerning the impact of wedge appeals on voter behavior is the 1994 gubernatorial election between Pete Wilson (R) and Kathleen Brown (D). Although
trailing badly at the start of the campaign, Wilson was able to use dual wedge appeals -- on crime and immigration -- to attract independent and swing voters and eventually win a decisive victory.

As the incumbent governor, Wilson faced a significant problem. California was in the throes of a severe recession, with an accompanying exodus of companies and jobs. Early in the campaign, Kathleen Brown attempted to capitalize on the recession and her credentials as State Treasurer.

**Ads: Brown – Economy**

Recognizing that the state of the economy represented a hopeless cause, Wilson campaigned instead on his credentials as a crime fighter and his opposition to illegal immigration. He linked his candidacy with two well-known statewide propositions – Proposition 184 and Proposition 187. The former, also known as the “three strikes” measure, was approved by a landslide margin (72:28 percent). Proposition 187, which also attracted majority support, proposed limiting or eliminating illegal immigrants’ eligibility for a variety of government services. The Wilson campaign invested heavily in advertising on both issues.
Wilson’s efforts to shift the agenda were aided (quite inexplicably) by the Brown campaign, which decided to engage Wilson on the issue of crime despite her opposition to the death penalty and to Proposition 184. Attempting to preempt Wilson’s soft-on-crime attacks, Brown introduced a Horton-like critique of Wilson’s decision to parole a violent offender, setting in motion a series of ads on the subject of crime.

Ad: Brown – Crime
As a result of this tactical error, the California electorate was exposed to a genuine “dialogue” on the issue of crime and the three strikes measure. On this dimension, most voters including many Democrats favored Wilson over Brown. As a result, voters’ impressions of the candidates became increasingly tinged with their preferences on Proposition 184, and Brown’s support dropped precipitously (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3: Erosion of Brown Support in 1994 Gubernatorial Campaign](Source: Field Poll)

**Drivers’ Licenses and the Election of The Terminator**

The campaign to recall Governor Davis provides the most recent instance of wedge issues at work. The conventional wisdom has it that Governor Davis was the victim of the state’s economic troubles -- the evaporation of substantial budget surpluses, price gouging by energy companies, and a general sense that state government was “broken.” Despite the substantial plurality of registered Democrats statewide,
Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger was able to defeat Governor Davis because (according to the pundits) of his celebrity status, and because of his pledges to undertake basic reform of the governmental process.

There can be no denying that Governor Davis had presided over serious policy debacles, and that his relatively narrow 2002 victory over Bill Simon was symptomatic of his low stock with the California electorate. Given an opportunity to choose between a relatively colorless and unpopular incumbent and a likeable, well-known actor, a clear majority of voters opted for the latter.

Both standard explanations for the success of the recall campaign -- negative evaluations of Governor Davis’ record, and greater personal affect for Arnold Schwarzenegger miss an important ingredient of the recall campaign, namely, Davis’ much-publicized decision to sign into law the bill (SB 60) making people who had entered the state illegally eligible for a driver’s license. Under this bill, applicants without social security cards could be licensed if they provided a taxpayer identification number and one other form of personal documentation. Davis had vetoed the bill in 2001, but reversed himself and signed it into law in September 2003.
As far as public opinion was concerned, SB 60 was anathema (see Table 1): by a 2:1 margin, Californians felt that the bill threatened national security. Among whites and Asians, opponents outnumbered proponents by 3:1. Only Hispanics assessed SB 60 positively, and even among this natural constituency the margin of support was narrow. For voters concerned with immigration, then, Schwarzenegger -- who had pledged to repeal the bill -- was clearly the preferable candidate.³

³ Governor Schwarzenegger’s first legislative action, carried out on December 1, 2003, was to sign the repeal measure into law.
Table 1: Immigration in the 2003 Recall Campaign

Some people say that allowing illegal immigrants to get a driver's license will result in more insured drivers and safer roads. Others say that giving driving licenses to illegal immigrants will hurt national security. What do you think?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LATINOS</th>
<th>WHITES</th>
<th>ASIANS</th>
<th>AFRO-AMS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More insured, safer roads</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt national security</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t really say</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
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N: (232) (742) (83) (49)

Source: Knowledge Networks statewide survey of 1124 CA residents; table entries are column percentages

How did voter sentiment on the drivers’ license issue play out in the recall election? The evidence for this analysis is a statewide survey of likely voters carried out shortly before the election. Respondents were asked to evaluate Governor Davis’ record in office (most thought he had performed very poorly), to indicate their feelings about Arnold Schwarzenegger on a 0-100 “feeling thermometer” (Schwarzenegger’s average rating was just above 50), and, of course, to indicate their vote choice on the recall question and the replacement candidate ballot.

Evaluations of Davis’s record and thermometer ratings for Schwarzenegger both responded primarily to voters’ partisanship. Democrats were less critical of Davis, and Republicans were far more enthusiastic about Schwarzenegger. As shown in Figure 4, however, voters’ positions on the drivers’ license bill were almost as powerful an influence on their candidate evaluations. In the case of Governor Davis, cynical voters -- those who felt that “people in state government” were crooked and wasted their tax dollars -- were more likely to rate his performance negatively. Overall, immigration clearly dominated the energy crisis, social issues such as abortion or gay rights, and generalized cynicism over state government as a voting cue. After taking into account
party affiliation, this election was not about economic mismanagement or disaffection from state government; rather, it was about controlling immigration.

Figure 4: Ingredients of Gray Davis and Arnold Schwarzenegger Evaluations

The strength of the immigration issue as a wedge appeal is transparent when we examine the replacement candidate choices of Democrats, Republicans and independents (see Figure 5). Among swing voters or independents who opposed granting of licenses to illegal entrants, 56 percent voted for Schwarzenegger and 9 percent for Bustamante. More tellingly, Schwarzenegger defeated Bustamante by ten percentage points (39 to 29) among “anti-license” Democrats. Clearly, immigration was a powerful wedge
issue in 2003, attracting substantial numbers of Democrats to Schwarzenegger. Had Bustamante been able to reduce the Democratic defection rate to near zero, the replacement election would have been quite close with 34% of the vote going to Bustamante and 35% to Schwarzenegger.

**Figure 5: Immigration as a Wedge Issue in the 2003 Recall Election**

![Position on drivers' license bill](image)

**Implications**

The successful use of immigration as a wedge issue in 1994 and again in 2003 suggests that the political environment in California has changed little over the past decade. This may seem paradoxical, given the well-documented changes in the ethnic

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4 Some 22 percent of Democrats voted for Schwarzenegger. Not surprisingly, 83 percent of this group was non-Hispanic.
composition of the state population. Whites accounted for 60 percent of the adult population of the state in 1992, but only 47 percent in 2003. The Latino share of the population, on the other hand, increased from 24 to 33 percent. Even allowing for considerable Latino skepticism over SB 60, one suspects that the outcome of the 2003 election may have been altered had the distribution of ethnicity among voters matched that among the adult population.

The stark discrepancy between the composition of the two groups (the adult population and the voting electorate) can be captured by computing “representation ratios” for whites and Latinos between 1980 and 2002 (see Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). The representation ratio is a simple measure of inequality, defined as the ratio of voters to adult citizens. If Latinos make up 30 percent of the population, but only 10 percent of voters, their representation ratio would be .33, representing under-representation by two-thirds. A ratio of 1.0 would indicate that a group is represented exactly in accord with its size, whereas ratios in excess of 1.0 would indicate overrepresentation.

**Figure 6: Voters vs. Adult Population**
As shown in Figure 6, Latinos have remained significantly under-represented in the electorate, only once (2000) achieving a 50 percent rate of representation vis-à-vis their numbers. Despite losing their majority status in the population, whites are still the largest group within the electorate accounting for some 70 percent of voters in 2002. Interestingly, the 2002 California electorate is a virtual replica of the 1980 population -- 70 percent white and only 14 percent Latino. In short, whites have retained their dominant political status, primarily because of low turnout among Latinos.

Given the distribution of ethnicity within the electorate, it should come as no surprise that candidates turn to issues that capitalize on white racial identity. Were the situation reversed, and Latinos the dominant electoral group, it is unlikely that issues of illegal immigration or eligibility for driver’s licenses would gain significant political traction. An axiom of political campaigns is that candidates respond to the preferences of voters, not non-voters; until the Latino vote begins to match the Latino population, the incentive to use wedge appeals remains strong.

For those who seek a more representative electorate, the answer lies in civic outreach and get-out-the-vote campaigns. Political science research on turnout suggests that these efforts can boost turnout quite substantially. In the case of young voters (as well as adults), Donald Green and Alan Gerber have demonstrated that in-person and telephone-based canvassing both provide a significant impetus to turnout (an increase of over five percent), at a fraction of the cost of national media campaigns (Green and Gerber, 2001; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson, 2002).

Even more dramatic results occur when youth-oriented civic outreach takes the form of interactive digital media, a form of communication with which the young are
especially adept. In stark contrast to their under-representation in any form of political action, youth enjoy a massive advantage as daily users of information technology. The Political Communication Lab at Stanford has developed an interactive, multimedia CD presentation that synthesizes substantive information about the candidates and their positions on the issues with a variety of arcade games, contests and quizzes all designed to make election-related material especially appealing to youth. Based on a pilot study carried out during the 2002 California gubernatorial campaign, we have documented that access to such a CD dramatically boosts youth political engagement. In fact, the pilot study demonstrated that use of the CD raised \textbf{actual} youth turnout by fifteen percent (see Iyengar and Jackman, 2003).

In conclusion, those who seek to blunt the appeal of wedge issues would do well to invest in civic outreach, especially efforts featuring interactive technology. The costs of outreach are reasonably modest, and the payoffs immediate.
References


